CAT O'MOUNTAIN

ARTHUR O. FRIEL

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STEADILY SHE PROBED HIS FACE, AND SLOWLY SHE NODDED

Cat O' Mountain

BY

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"King — of Kearsarge"

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Cat-o'-Mountain

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To

JAMES and CAROLINE MACK

whose unfailing kindliness
to the mysterious prowler of
The Traps
will long be remembered by
"The Detective"

FOREWORD

At the northern end of the Shawangunk range lies a region where the Maker of Mountains went mad.

Into his new-laid rock the giant crashed his huge hammer, smashing asunder his handiwork, gouging out chasms, splitting it into fissure and cavern and abyss, slashing its eastern edge into a frowning precipice. When he had gone, up into some of his hammer-scars welled subterranean waters, forming crag-bound lakes hundreds of feet higher than the rugged valley floor. Other chasms became gulfs of verdure, crammed with a veritable jungle of hardwoods and evergreens. And there, in the labyrinth of tree and bowlder, fierce brutes and venomous snakes bred and fought and slew. It was the home of the wolf, the panther, and the bear; of the rattlesnake and the copperhead.

Then came men: savages who killed and ate the wild beasts and clothed themselves in their furry hides. Through the gorges and down the slopes they laid their trails, along which they roved for centuries in hunt and tribal war. At length they paused, staring eastward at new fires burning below them—the fires of white men.

The inevitable followed. First by firewater, then by firearms, the Dutch settlers crowded the tawny

"duyvils" out of the forested lowlands between the river of Hendrick Hudson and the mountain wall. But behind that wall, in the natural stronghold created by the mad Mountain-Maker, the red men long held their own. More, at times they swooped out from the one small gap in the cliffs on bloody raids. And when the vengeful whites retaliated with invasions of their fastness, they ambushed those palefaces along their trails.

Then the settlers ended it. Trapped again and again within that gulf, they in turn became the trappers. Stealthily moving in force, they garrisoned the heights of Mohonk and Minnewaska; they outwitted, outmanœuvred, outambushed the Indians; they herded them back against their own precipices, cornered them among their own bowlders, slew them without mercy. Returning to their lowland farms, they left behind them a silent, blood-spattered, death-strewn hole in the hills which henceforth—because of its traps and countertraps—was to be known as The Traps.

Long afterward, men came in again; white men, and red men too, no longer foes. They cleared little farms, brought in their women, intermarried and interbred, led such primitive existences as might have been expected. Dwelling in their own little world, they followed their own inclinations in such matters as mating and hunting and drinking—and thereby achieved a reputation somewhat dubious. The tongue-wagging folk outside declared the Trapsmen were "wife-swappers" and "moonshiners" and other things. And perhaps they were.

Rumor has asserted, too, that these men first settled that craggy hole not because they would but because they must; that the country outside was "too hot" for them; that they even had to obtain their wives by becoming squaw men or by the primeval custom of capture; and that for many years their land was distinctly unsafe for any man not of their clan. This also may be true. Be that as it may, they lived hard lives, and many of them died hard deaths. Yet they lived as free men, untrammeled by slavish subservience to the myriad laws manufactured in the cities beyond them.

But they, too, passed. As the bear and the wolf and the Indian faded out of that country after the coming of the white man, so the Trapsmen have almost vanished before the encroachments of commercialism. Beside the upland lakes now rise those structures from which the pioneer turns with loathing—summer hotels. Moreover, virtually all of the intervening Traps has been bought in by the hotel barons. The little homes of the vanished men are slowly rotting apart; their tiny fields and their hard-grown orchards are going the way of the ancient Indian trails —disappearing into wilderness where snakes thrive unmolested. Few indeed are the people who now live in the mountain bowl; fewer still those who are native-born. The others are from outside.

Yet there are, in the region round about, two or three old men—taciturn, abrupt, whole-souled old fellows—who were born in the Traps and who will die not far from the Traps. From them, and from the

whispering ghosts which, by day and by dark, have drifted along beside me on the silent trails and talked to me in weird crevasse and uncanny old house, I have learned the tale which is here set down. It is a tale of Yesterday, in a land of Yesterday, chronicled by one who was there—yesterday.

A. O. F.

New York, 1923.

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Cat-o'-Mountain

CHAPTER I

THE PANTHER

HIGH on the crags a panther screamed.

Savage, sinister, yet appallingly human—like the malevolent squall of an infuriated hag—the cry tore through the night shadows whelming the mountain-girt gulf of the Traps. Among the gigantic bowlders and the uncanny crevasses of Dickie Barre it hurtled in a shattered wave of sound. Out across the dense tangle of underbrush and the lazy-creeping water of Coxing Hill it fled, freezing in their tracks the smaller brethren of the wild—fox and raccoon and rabbit and mink—which moved there in their furtive foraging. From the forested steeps of Mohonk and Millbrook it reverberated, and among those trees it was swallowed up.

Again the malignant wail broke out; and now the beast which voiced it was not in the same spot as before. Somewhere on the very brink of the precipice of Dickie Barre the huge cat had been, and somewhere on that edge he still was. But he was moving, seeking a crack or crevice through which he might steal swiftly downward without hurling himself to death on the

rubble of cliff-fragments below; and his failure to find it at once exasperated his ugly nature to its ugliest. His eyes told him something down there was moving. His nose said the thing was human, was hurt, was harmless. His fierce brain knew it would be an easy kill, and his ravening jaws slavered at the realization that after one rending attack he could gorge himself —on the tender flesh of a woman.

Baffled, maddened, he screeched once more. Then he became silent. He had found something promising: not a direct line of descent, but a narrow shelf dipping diagonally down the face of the cliff. Along this he proceeded with swift, sure stealth.

Then, down in the density behind him, a light shot out from between two towering bowlders. A clean, brilliant beam it was—the ray of a carbide camp-lamp. Its white sheen played up, down, right, left; and as it moved, the rock-masses and the trees and brush round about stood forth, then vanished again into the gloom. But it did not advance. Between those two colossal blocks it stayed, peering like a dazzling eye.

All at once it jumped. From the chaos of chunks between silent cat and silent light, a voice had cried out.

"Help! Oh—help!"

It was a high, clear, penetrating call, with an undernote of terror and pain.

Two voices answered: one, a ferine snarl from the merciless cat-creature beyond; the other, a quick response in the tones of a man.

"Right here! Where are you?"

"Here into the—the rocks! Oh, hurry up, before that critter gits to me!"

"Coming!"

The glaring white eye moved forward in haste. Behind it, boots scraped and bumped on rock. It rose in a steep slant, slid suddenly down, accompanied by more scraping of boot-heels; disappeared between two blocks leaning together; emerged beyond, ascended again, wavering erratically with the strain of climbing a treacherous slope; halted at the peak of another bowlder and rapidly searched the surroundings.

"Can't see you!" the man panted. "Speak up!"

"Hold stiddy a minute!" implored the other voice. "I'm a-comin'—up this rock—if I don't slip. Oh!" The last was a choked moan.

"What's the matter? Hurt?"

"Ye-yes. But wait—I'm a-comin' ——"

The light quivered, as if the man behind it were impatient to leap forward. But it remained poised on its own bowlder, shooting at the upper edge of another mass of conglomerate beyond which the girlish voice had spoken. A few seconds later, atop that rough stone, something glinted red-gold in the white glare. Under it rose wide gray eyes, a pale face—the eyes suddenly shut and the face shrank from the blinding beam. Again the gas ray lit up the glowing glory of the red hair.

"All right. Stick there," commanded the man. A quick twist of the light—then another grind of sliding heels, terminating in a solid bump like the impact of a gun-butt against stone. The white eye now was swing-

ing about at the base of the bowlder, hunting a way around the almost vertical block. A few seconds, and it began staggering over the smaller debris toward one corner.

"Oh—look out—here's the critter now!"

With the warning came a swift scramble overhead. The light wheeled and revealed a girlish figure in a torn drab dress swinging itself out—slipping rapidly down—hanging by its hands from the upper edge.

"Hold hard!" snapped the man. "Don't be silly—he's a coward, like all cats. He'll run if you say 'boo.' Hang tight a minute. Don't drop."

But the girl, dangling with face turned upward and heels a yard or more above the jagged jumble below, sniffed scornfully at his assertion of knowledge. Before he could make two steps toward her she let go. Down she darted in a grayish streak, and on the stones beneath she crumpled.

One sharp moan of pain broke from her. Then, looking upward, she breathed: "Look!"

The light switched up. From the edge above now protruded another head; a flat-nosed, fang-toothed, tawny visage whose eyes flamed green with ferocity and whose snarling jaws writhed in malignant menace.

A startled grunt sounded behind the light. The white eye lifted, hung poised as if held by a hand grown rigid. Beside it, twin tubes of steel centered on that horrid head.

Boomboom! A double flash leaped thundering from the tubes. In a swirl of blue smoke the face of the great cat vanished.

The light pitched backward, fell clattering on the rocks. A muffled impact and a sullen thwack of metal told that the man and his gun too had been knocked down by the recoil. Over behind the bowlder something else thudded softly and was still.

But, though dropped, the lantern burned faithfully on. Its ray lit up a pair of high-laced boots, tan corduroys, and a hammerless shotgun sprawling on a slanting bowlder. A second later a broad hand swooped at it and righted it. The gun was lifted, broken at the breech, swiftly reloaded and snapped shut. Then the legs drew up and the light rose, darting at the girl.

She was huddled where she had dropped, but her pale face was alive and her gray eyes wide open. As the glare fell on her she threw up an arm to shield her dark-dilated pupils. Upon the tanned skin of that firm young forearm showed a long red gash.

"Good Lord! You're badly hurt!" exclaimed the man.

The lips under the shadowing arm curved in a strained smile.

"'Tain't much," she deprecated. "I got a gouge when I tumbled. Guess you kilt Mister Catamount, or scairt him off anyway. They take a mighty lot of killin' sometimes. Now can you git me down to where I can walk? My ankle's hurt."

A quiet laugh of admiration came from the invisible man.

"You're a plucky little lady," he informed her. "Most girls in your place would be fainting or going

all to pieces. As for walking, I don't know. This is a tough hole to navigate in after dark. But we'll see."

The light moved toward her. As it advanced the man added in a chiding tone: "You shouldn't have dropped like that. No wonder your ankle's hurt."

"Is that so! What was I goin' to do, Mister Smarty—let that critter claw me? And I hurt my leg an hour ago, not jest now. And I wish you'd look and see if the catamount's alive yet. He's been pesterin' round here 'most a month, and you better kill him good and dead."

"Oh, he's dead enough ——"

"You go and look!"

Again the quiet laugh sounded.

"Just as you say, my lady. I think I heard him fall over back there."

Once more the light turned. It wavered around the base of the bowlder, bobbed up and down among the jags and juts of the rock-heap, paused, swung slowly, came to rest on a furry huddle hanging limp over a misshapen stone. There dangled two powerful fore-legs, topped by massive shoulders, terminated by big paws. Between them hung a red ruin which had been a head.

"Whew!" whistled the man, studying the size of the legs and the breadth of the back. "What a brute! Never knew they grew so big. Lucky he was close enough to take those charges before they could spread. Otherwise that bird-shot would only have maddened him."

Turning, he picked his way back to the spot where the girl waited. He found her sitting up on a stone and frowning down at her left foot. For the first time he observed that her feet and the shapely ankles above them were bare. The left one was much swollen.

"He's as dead as they make 'em," he sang out cheerily. "We're a bunged-up lot, aren't we? Cat lost his head, your arm and foot are hurt, and my right shoulder's kicked into the middle of my back from letting both barrels go at once. And even my gun is all mauled from falling on the rocks."

"Ain't that too bad?" The tone was amusedly sarcastic. "But I guess I'm the wust off—I've got more bad luck comin'."

"How so?"

"I'll catch hell when I git home," was the naive explanation.

For a minute the man was speechless. Then he chuckled.

"So? Then why go home?"

The mountain girl's answer was as straightforward as before.

"I don't know any other place to go."

Her sober face told that she spoke the gaunt truth, and that she dreaded the thought of returning to the house whence she had come. An awkward pause followed.

"Well, you may not get there to-night," the man declared. "I doubt if I can find my way out of this mess of rocks before daylight, and you certainly can't

go scrambling around on that bad foot. You'll have to come to my camp now and get bandaged up."

The auburn brows drew together in another frown, and the eyes under them peered toward him in open suspicion.

"I ain't so sure about that," she asserted. "I can git home some way alone, if I have to, and I don't figger to stay up here all night. Who are you?"

"Oh, just a rambling camper. But don't be silly. I'm not a skunk. I'll gladly take you home if it's possible and sensible, but until you're in condition to travel it's neither. Now you need a bandage on that arm, some hot water on the ankle, and—are you hungry?"

"I'm 'most starved," she admitted. "I got mad and run away this mornin', and I ain't et since breakfast."

"Oho! I'm afraid you're a temperamental little redbird. Well, come on down to camp and I'll feed you bacon and beans—and hot coffee, lots of it. How's that?"

"Sounds awful good. I guess you're all right. You go 'long and show the way."

She turned about on her stone. The movement disclosed a long rent in the faded dress, running from arm to waist, through which glowed pink flesh. Her skirt, too, was badly ripped. The man behind the light switched it from her to the formidable mass of stones ahead.

"If you can stub along on one foot," he suggested, "we can make better progress by hugging each other. I can stand it if you can."

A quick laugh answered him. The light veered back, revealing dancing eyes, perfect teeth, and flushed cheeks under the glowing hair.

"I can stand 'most anything—if I have to," she flashed. "And it looks like I'd have to."

"By George! Young lady, you're a little beauty when you laugh! I think I'm going to enjoy this trip. Wait a minute and I'll let you put your arm around my neck."

Followed the grind of boot-soles and the approach of the lamp.

"You're awful good." She laughed again. "You'd ought to sell soft soap for a livin', you've got so much of it."

"Humph! That'll do. Now let's walk."

Slowly the white eye wobbled along among the tumbled blocks. The only sounds behind it were those of labored breathing and curt directions regarding the placing of feet. Not once did the girl whimper from the pain of the injured ankle.

Presently the pair of tall cliff-chunks took shape ahead, their bases lost among smaller stones, their crests invisible in the upper gloom, their irregular sides framing a narrow black cañon which seemed to end in emptiness. But out from that gloomy slit drifted a tang of smouldering wood-smoke; and beyond it, the girl knew, the hidden camp of her unknown rescuer waited.

At the entrance to the covert they paused. So narrow was the passage that they could no longer advance side by side. But the carbide flame showed

that the footing ahead was smooth and almost level, offering no obstacle to her progress alone; also, that the distance to the cavern beyond was hardly more than a couple of rods.

"Now if you'll hop along by yourself for a few yards more you'll be there," spoke the tall, vague form behind the metal lamp. "Sorry my doorway's so tight, but it was made before I came here."

The injured girl, drooping against a stone beside her, let the jest pass without a smile.

"You go ahead," she prompted wearily. "You've got boots."

"What of it?" he puzzled.

"Snakes."

"Ouch! Snakes around here?"

"Why, sure. This country's full of 'em—rattlers and copperheads. Guess you ain't been into here long, mister."

"Right. I haven't. But—Lordy! You shouldn't go around barefoot in snake country."

"Mebbe. But folks can't wear out their shoes into summer if they're goin' to have 'em for winter, can they?"

He made no reply. Into the gap he turned, and through it he passed to the larger space beyond, his wide shoulders rubbing the rock as he passed. Behind him she limped along, leaning against one wall.

At the end of the little cañon he stepped downward, halted, and set gun and lamp on a rock shelf. Some twenty feet away, under an overhang of the cliff, an open blanket-roll and various small camp-tools showed

beside an Indian fire—short sticks laid like wagon-wheel spokes, with the flame at the hub.

"Now you can hug me for the last time—maybe," he solemnly stated. "I'm going to tote you over there. It's rough going."

With which she was lifted and carried across a rubble of fragments to the blankets.

As he straightened up in the brilliant light thrown across by the lamp, she saw him plainly for the first time: a lithe, firm-jawed man whose face glowed red with new sunburn between a gray flannel shirt and a head of silky blond hair; a clean-mouthed, clean-limbed chap whose twinkling blue eyes might have brought an approving smile to the lips of many a girl far more critical of men than this maiden of the mountains. But no hint of liking for her new-found friend dawned in her face.

Into her eyes darted a light of mingled recognition, suspicion, repulsion. She shrank from him as if he had suddenly become one of those snakes against which she had just warned him.

"Oh, Lord!" she breathed. "It's you! The detective!"

CHAPTER II

NIGGER NAT'S GIRL

BLANK astonishment crept across the countenance of the blond man. Motionless as the rocks around him he stood, staring down at the hostile face upturned to his.

"Detective? Me?" he muttered.

"Yes, you!" she flared. "Think you're smart, don't you? Mebbe you think us folks are a lot of numbskulls, but we ain't. And seein' you jest helped me out of a fix, I'll tell you somethin', Mister Spy—you better git out of the Traps right quick, while you're able to travel!"

The man threw back his head and laughed—a gurgling laugh of pure enjoyment.

"Well, if this isn't rich!" he chuckled. "Old Cap Hampton, the famous dee-teck-tiff! Say, little redbird, I'm glad you dropped in this evening. I was thinking I'd go to-morrow, but now I reckon I'll stay awhile. Looks as if this place might prove interesting."

The gray eyes snapped.

"Oh, it'll be interestin'!" was the ominous prediction. "If you don't git right outside the Big Wall and stay out—some of the boys will be sleepin' into new blankets and totin' a newfangled shotgun, I shouldn't wonder."

His gaze dropped to the blankets under her, which

were obviously new; then darted to his hammerless gun across the way. When his eyes returned to hers the merriment was gone from them. They glinted like cold blue steel.

"So that's the game, eh?" His voice was hard-edged. "To kill a stranger for his gun and money. Well, your 'boys' are slow. They were snooping around my camp down by the creek last night, but they didn't have the nerve to do anything but watch. Thanks for your tip. Hereafter I'll load my gun with buckshot. You can tell your friends that."

A flush of anger dyed the girl's cheeks.

"Oh, that ain't it!" she denied. "Strangers are safe enough, long's they mind their own business. But we've got no use for sneakin' spies that den up into the rocks like copperheads. And if you think anybody's scairt of your buckshot, Mister Spy, jest remember this is old Injun country, and folks was gittin' kilt into the Traps before your grandpop was borned. If all the dead men that's been shot and tommyhawked round here should git up all together they'd—they'd shake the hills with their trompin'! You and your buckshot—ha, ha, ha!"

Her scornful laugh stung like a whip-lash. Yet, though his sunburned face grew still redder under its sting, he thought: "Lordy, what a stunning little beauty she is with that color! There's more than one kind of wildcat in these hills, too. I like this place better every minute."

Aloud he said: "All right, fair damosel. I don't know ——"

Abruptly she started up—winced and paled as her sprained ankle stabbed with pain—but caught the wall and faced him in righteous wrath.

"Don't you cuss me!" she blazed.

"Huh? I didn't!"

"You did! You called me a dam-somethin' ——"

"Oho! Fair damosel? Why, that's an old-fashioned compliment—means 'beautiful girl,' or something like that. Would you rather be called a cross-eyed old maid?"

"No!" The word snapped. But she smiled in spite of herself.

"You must be a furriner to talk like that," she added. "Why don't you say what you mean? Dam-o-sell—that ain't a name to call folks by. It's 'most the same as what mom calls me."

"What's that?"

"Dambrat."

He regarded her a moment in silence.

"Your mother calls you a brat?" he slowly asked then.

"Brat—and lots of other things," she nodded. "And now I've got to git home. I'll git a good hidin', I shouldn't wonder, but I won't stay here ——"

"You will!" came his incisive contradiction. "You'll stay here until that foot is doctored and you've had some food. Sit down!"

At the crisp crackle of his command she eyed him in surprised defiance. Her chin lifted, and she took a combative step on the hurt foot. Pallor and pain swept again across her face, and she staggered. He

promptly picked her up, squirming and resisting; set her down on the blankets, and inexorably held her there. Then, his eyes boring into hers, he spoke in cool determination.

"Behave yourself. Listen to me.

"You're not going away until I say so. I'll not say so until you're better able to travel. You won't be able to travel until that ankle is reduced. It won't be reduced until I've worked on it. That's all there is to that.

"Now about me. I'm no detective. I am Douglas Hampton, a rover, a drifter, with no home and no folks. I've been in quite a few places, done quite a few things; but I've never been a detective and I don't intend to be one. My last job was as reporter on a New York newspaper, and I lasted almost a year. Got fired last week because the city editor rode me too hard and I sat him down in his own waste-basket. Now I'm in here because I feel like roughing it awhile and somebody told me it was rough up here in the Shawangunks.

"I intended to stay here only a day or two and then ramble along, stopping again wherever I found something that hit my fancy. But now that people around here think they're going to kick me out—I'll stay longer. I'm one of those cantankerous chaps who can be coaxed a mile but can't be kicked an inch. I always kick back.

"As I started to say awhile ago, I don't know the history of this hole in the hills, but I'm right willing to learn all about it—past and present. And if people

around here want to consider me a detective, let 'em. I don't care what they think. The only reason why I'm telling *you* who I am is—well, because I feel like it."

With that he took his hands from her shoulders and straightened up. She made no move to rise again. Steadily she probed his face, and slowly she nodded.

"You talk straight," she admitted. "But if you ain't here to spy, what are you doin' up here, hid into the ledge? Folks said you went out through the Gap this mornin' with your pack and all. So to-night I thought you must be some new feller."

"I did go. I moved because I want to sleep at night instead of watching men sneak around in the bushes. Then I decided to come back, and I came. Didn't try to hide myself, either—tramped right along the road. You people ought to keep sharper watch on desperate dee-teck-tiffs who wander in and out of here; you never know when they'll come back."

His cheerful grin brought an answering smile this time. But it did not last long. At his next question it vanished.

"By the way, what am I supposed to detect in here? Detectives have to detect something, you know."

"You be careful, mister, or you'll detect a rock fallin' off onto your head from up top, or a load of buckshot scatterin' out of the brush. Some of the boys are awful careless. If you figger to stay round here you better stay away from these ledges—and keep out of caves—and don't ask too many questions."

"M-hm. I take it that this is a good place to keep *still.*"

Her tongue made no answer; but her eyes narrowed at the emphasis on the word "still." He laughed again and bent to freshen the fire.

When he had moved the sticks inward upon their common focus and the flame was growing brighter and hotter, he frowned at a canvas water-bag pendent from a splinter of rock; thoughtfully eyed the girl's inflamed ankle and gashed arm; glanced at a small coffee-pot at the edge of the blaze, and ran a hand through his light hair. Then his face brightened. Rising, he rummaged in a small bag of waterproof fabric, from which he produced two flat tins of tobacco.

"Have to economize on water," he said. "All I own is in that cloth bucket, and the spring's a deuce of a distance down. Between bathing your arm and making coffee and fixing your ankle—well, I just can't cook that ankle as it should be done. But I can draw out most of the soreness with a tobacco poultice. That's what we'll have to do."

She eyed the two tins in his hand.

"Is that all the tobacco you've got?"

"Why, yes. But it's enough to do the trick."

"Then what'll you smoke? There ain't any stores here."

"Then I don't smoke for awhile," was the matter-of-fact reply.

Dropping the cans beside her, he strode over to the lantern and brought it and the gun to the overhanging wall. Swiftly then he put coffee to boil, dipped a cup-

ful of water from the canvas bag, flipped a clean white handkerchief from the ditty-bag, and returned to her. Without a word she let him inspect the lacerated arm.

"You got a nasty rip," he stated, scowling. "Right along the bone. How did you do it? Fall?"

"Yes." Her tone was more gentle now than it had yet been, and her eyes dwelt on the sober face bending over the injury. "I've—I've got a little secret up here—a hole into the rocks that's been my playhouse since I was little, and when mom's awful mean or pop's ugly drunk or—or I can't stand it down there, I come up here and stay all by my own self. This time I got to dreamin', I guess, and I went to sleep there. And when I woke up it was night. Mebbe I'd ought to have stayed there till mornin', but I was awful hungry, and I tried to git down the rocks and took a fall."

He nodded sympathetically, bathing the wound with gentle touch.

"And then that mis'rable catamount had to smell me. They're awful bad when they're hungry and smell blood. I thought I was a goner till your light showed. Who ever told you a catamount would run if you said boo?"

"Somebody who didn't know as much as he thought he did, I guess."

"I guess so too. They'll run from a dog 'most every time—even a little yippin' yappin' tarrier—and mostly they'll run from a man, but not always. If they've kilt somethin' or are jest goin' to kill somethin', look out. And they're ready to tear up a young 'un,

or a hurt woman, any time. If you shoot 'em you've got to kill 'em stone dead or they'll rip you. Jonah Hay, he kilt one last winter—shot it four times and blew its jaw off and everything—and it lived long enough to git to him and claw his legs terrible. Its hide was longer than Jonah is himself, and Jonah stands six foot."

He nodded again, absorbed in his work but marveling at her new friendliness. Now that she was talking, she chattered as easily as if to an old friend.

"And there was Sam Codd—he went to chop wood and run onto a little bobcat, nowheres near as big's a catamount. The critter had kilt a rabbit, and it come at Sam, ready to jump right onto him. Sam, he backed more'n a quarter of a mile through the snow, holdin' his axe ready to bust the critter, till he got to his cabin. Then he jumped in and got his gun. But by the time he come out the cat was gone back to the rabbit, and when he got there the rabbit was et and nothin' left but blood and tracks."

He desisted from his cleaning of the arm, which had remained as stoically steady as if it were not in the least tender. Tearing the edges of the big handkerchief, he bound it around the injury and carefully knotted the edge-strips. Then he turned to the coffee, which now was steaming. In a moment he put a cupful of the hot liquid in her hands and dumped the grounds from the pot.

"Only one good cupful to a pot, but it's strong enough to knock you over," he explained. "And I need the pot now for your ankle. After the tobacco

gets to drawing I'll cook some grub and make more coffee ——"

He paused suddenly, staring at one of the tobacco-tins he had picked up. Its blue revenue-paper seal was broken.

"Now when did I open that can?" he puzzled, turning up the lid. "I was sure these were fresh. Confound it, it's only half full!"

She made no answer. She blew on the coffee and took a tentative sip.

"Ooh! It's scaldin' hot!"

"Uh-huh. Well, this other can's full, anyhow. Guess I can make out."

While the fresh water came to a boil he squinted repeatedly at the opened can, half rifled of its fragrant brown slices. He did not see the impish glances she threw at him. Nor, when he brought the hot water, the tobacco, and more handkerchiefs, did he spy the laughing light in the demurely downcast eyes.

With utmost care, though with necessary firmness, he bound the hot-water-soaked slices around the swollen ankle. Then he poured more hot water on the bandages until, despite herself, she flinched and drew up the foot.

"That'll do, I reckon," he said. "Lucky I have plenty of handkerchiefs. That's one thing I'm a crank about—plenty of clean handkerchiefs and socks. Now I'll warm up some beans *a la* can."

"Don't you want a smoke?" she teased.

"Well, since the tobacco's all gone, I do," he frankly admitted. "However ——"

"Then fill your pipe!" And from under the blanket-edge she produced the missing slices.

"Well, you—you ——" he stuttered.

"Now don't you call me a dam-sell again, mister! You stuff your pipe and have a good smoke."

He scowled, grinned, laughed, produced a stubby briar, and obeyed orders.

"I've a large mind to spank you," he threatened, between puffs. "But I never like to pick on a cripple. So instead I'll condemn you to stay here all night."

"That's all right," she countered serenely. "I've made up my mind to stay anyway."

He missed two puffs while he stared at her.

"Glad to see you're showing sense," he blurted. "But what's the reason for the sudden change of heart?"

"You're smokin' the reason. 'Most any man round here would have kilt that catamount. That'd be fun. But none of 'em would use up his last smokin' on a woman—not if both her legs were busted. A feller that would do that is worth trustin'."

He threw up his hands.

"Talk about feminine logic! That beats 'em all," he laughed. "Well, fair dam—I beg pardon—young woman, just who are you, if I may ask?"

The answer staggered him.

"Me? Oh, I'm only Nigger Nat's girl."

Over his pipe he blinked at her.

"My name's Marry," she went on. "Marry Oaks. My whole name is Marryin', but it's Marry for short."

"Marion," he repeated absently. "But who's Nigger Nat? Not a colored man!"

The frank eyes looked steadily back at him.

"Why, yes he is. He's yeller—half nigger. He's my pop. And mom's part Injun."

CHAPTER III

PIPE-SMOKE—AND POWDER-SMOKE

Dawn swept across the Shawangunks.

From the far-off crests of the Berkshires light leaped athwart the silvery Hudson and smote the frowning cliffs of the Great Wall of the Wallkill Valley: a grim gray precipice stretching mile after mile to the northeast, towering eight hundred feet upward from the lower lands; unscalable, impenetrable save at one small high gap—the Jaws of the Traps, whence in other days the redskin had slipped forth in bloody foray on the settlers below, and where in turn the white man had lurked in retaliatory ambush. Through that gap now wormed the sandy road of the descendants of those pioneers, and along that road at this early hour passed nothing more sinister than dawn-sheen and morning breeze.

At the top of the crag-wall the light sped across the forested gulf of the Traps itself, with its tiny scattered farmhouses and its rocky clearings and mysterious by-paths, to strike against more cliffs—the glacier-gouged wall of Minnewaska, holding in its stony setting a tiny jewel of an upland lake; and the fissured butte of Dickie Barre, father of gigantic bowlders and guardian of unknown caverns. And as the dayshine flung itself against those forbidding ledges and then

fled on westward, the following breeze also threw against them a wave of sound—the dry quacking chorus of myriads of katydids.

All through the moonless September night those queer insects had ground out their tuneless song, so monotonous and so steady that the ears of other living things had long since become dulled to it. But now, swept by the dawn-wind in among the echoing crevices and cañons, it seemed suddenly redoubled in volume. Upon the senses of native bird and beast it made slight impact, for they were well used to it; but on the nerves of a long, blanketed figure lying in a narrow passage between towering stone walls it struck like the clatter of an alarm-clock. His towsled blond head moved, his long-lashed lids lifted, and his blue eyes darted about in inspection of his surroundings.

Beside his head lay a shotgun, its muzzle pointing outward, its safety-catch off, ready for instant use. Beyond the slit of an entrance showed nothing but more rocks and a labyrinthine tangle of trees and brush. Behind, the sheer wall of Dickie Barre alone was visible across a roomy space open to the sky. The only sounds were the everlasting quack of the insects and the subdued *yarrup* of some invisible yellowhammer flitting about in search for a breakfast.

He yawned, stretched, and sat up. The blanket dropped from his chest, and he stared blankly at it. Then his gaze shot toward the cliff beyond.

"Well, you ought to be spanked hard, you little bunch of wilfulness!" he muttered. "Sneaked in here after I was asleep and spread this blanket over me,

didn't you? And you needed both of 'em yourself—it's clammy up here at night. And walking on that bad foot, too!"

But his eyes belied his growling tone as he arose and tiptoed to the end of the passage. As they swept the farther wall and dwelt on the little huddle of gray blanket beside the charred embers of the fire they softened still more. Obviously the girl muffled under that stout sheet of wool was sleeping as peacefully on her mattress of fragrant hemlock tips as if at home in her own bed.

"These mountain girls are as tough as rawhide," he thought. "Imagine a city girl going through what she did last night without a whine! And sleeping like that under a rock. And ——"

His hand strayed to a shirt pocket and fingered some crumbled shreds of tobacco.

"And saving some smokes for me and stubbing over here on a sprained ankle to give me half the bedding. Would any of those flossy dolls in New York —or Chi or San Fran or N'Orleans—do that? Humph!"

Softly he stepped along the little shelf where last night he had set lamp and gun; sank to a comfortable squat, his back against the wall; filled and lit his pipe. Thereafter he squatted a few minutes smoking and musing.

"'Nigger Nat's girl,'" he thought. "Daddy a drunken yellow mongrel, mother a hard-tongued half-breed. How in thunder can a pair like that produce such a witching wildcat as Marion Oaks? Her skin's

brown, but the brown is only sun-tan, or my eyes are liars. And that hair and those eyes! How come?"

A flirt of active wings drew his gaze away for a moment. On a limb of a plucky young pine growing from the face of the cliff above, a pair of inquisitive yellowhammers had paused to spy and gossip. Their bright eyes peered knowingly downward, and as they bobbed and bowed their restless heads the black crescents under their creamy throats vied for notice with the brilliant red splashes behind their crowns. Up and down the branch they hopped, murmuring fussily over this most scandalous event—a man and a girl shamelessly occupying an outdoor boudoir, just as if they were as free of convention as the birds themselves. The man smiled up at them and waved a hand in acknowledgment of their sharp scrutiny. Instantly they winnowed away on whispering wings, to perch again farther on and renew their eager watch. Douglas resumed his puffing and puzzling.

"Must be a throwback of heredity," he decided. "There are such things as red-headed niggers. Saw one in Detroit once. The white strain in her folks cropped out strong when she was born. Must be tough for a girl to be white and yet have the tainted blood in her veins. No self-respecting white man could marry her, of course. But it's a dirty shame that you have to be cursed by your ancestors, little Miss Marion. You haven't a chance. You'll become the 'woman' of some ignorant brute down below, and before you're thirty you'll be old and gaunt and broken-spirited."

He flipped the ash from the top of his pipe-bowl and puffed on.

"And yet your mind is that of a white girl—and a thoroughbred, too," he silently asserted. "The tobacco and the blanket prove that. And you despise your mongrel people. You run away up here to your little secret 'playhouse,' and there you dream yourself to sleep, as you did yesterday. And there's poetry in you, too. Let's see, what was that you said—'If all the dead men here should rise they'd shake the hills with their tramping!'"

His gaze grew absent, as through the smoke he visioned an army of musket-bearing pioneers, shaggy-haired and deerskin-clad, and of fierce-faced Indians carrying bow and tomahawk, marching along the ancient trails. They passed, those long-dead fighting men, and in their wake strode whiskered mountaineers of a later day, gripping shotgun and rifle, watching one another in distrust—the victims of bullet and buckshot hurled from the masking thickets of rhododendron, the men who had died at the hands of their neighbors. Crag and crevasse echoed to the tread of their ghostly feet, and the cliffs quivered in unison. Out through the Jaws of the Traps they swung into the eye of the rising sun. The caverns ceased to echo. The man found himself staring at a gray blanket and listening to the rasping clack of the katydids.

With a long sigh he arose and knocked out his pipe against his thigh.

"Oh, well," he muttered. "The past is past, the present is here, and the future is rolling closer every

minute. Poor little kid, with your dreams and your picture-words! I'm sorry for you. But all I can do is to cook some more grub for you and take you home. Then we'll each have to gang our ain gait."

He moved toward the dead fire, still stepping softly. But half-way across the rocky rubble he halted short, struck by a sudden memory.

"By thunder!" he exclaimed. "I wonder if ——"

Back into his mind had come a fragment of a tale told months ago in New York by a chance acquaintance—a man from up-State.

"Yessir," he heard the voice saying, "there's queer things back in the hills—stories that's never been told much. These fellers I'm thinkin' about, now: they were the hardest crowd you'd ever want to meet. They were bad whites and bad Indians and bad niggers, all in this one gang and livin' in back of a long mountain wall with only one way into it. Outlaws? Yessir, and worse'n that. Land pirates, I'd call 'em. Cut your throat and never even wipe off the knife afterward.

"Well, sir, they'd come out of this here hole-in-the-wall I'm tellin' about, and they'd waylay folks drivin' along the roads, the rich folks in coaches and so on. And they'd kill the men travelers and strip 'em clean. And they'd carry off the women and hold 'em for ransom. And if the ransom wasn't paid the women never got out. They had to stay there and be the women of that gang. If they were extry good-lookin' maybe they never got a chance to be ransomed. More'n one fine lady went into that hole in the hills

and never was heard of again. Yessir. That's right.

"Oh, yes, it was a long while ago. Good many years before our time. After the Revolution, maybe —it was pretty rough in lots of places round here then, and these fellers could fight off a whole army by guardin' that gap of theirs. What ever become of 'em I don't know. But the descendants of that gang and the women prisoners are livin' there yet—outlaw white blood and high-toned white blood and nigger and Indian blood all mixed up together—and I've heard tell that some of 'em are handsome, especially the women. No, I never was in there myself ——"

The memory-voice died and was lost. Vainly he racked his brain for more of the tale. Where did that man say the place was? In these Shawangunks? Farther south in the Ramapos? Up north in the Catskills, or far beyond in the Adirondacks? No answer came. The rest of the story, its beginning and end, were lost in the fog of many such chance conversations at odd moments and in odd places.

But he was sure that the locale of that legend was somewhere in the mountains of New York State. And out there across the Traps was a long mountain wall with but one way of entrance. And this girl's father and mother were of mongrel blood, and ——

"By the Lord Harry, it fits!" he exclaimed aloud. "If this isn't the place it ought to be. And there's been a lady—a real, high-bred lady—in your family not many generations ago, Miss Marion, or I'm a Chinaman!"

The surrounding rocks reverberated with his words. The blanket before him moved quickly. Out from it rose dancing gray eyes, glowing cheeks, and laughing red lips.

"Mornin', Mister Detective!" she caroled. "Are you talkin' into your sleep, or did you find a drink somewheres? You're foolish, sounds like."

Somewhat sheepish, he stood a moment without reply. His eyes dwelt on the wealth of tumbled hair, now glowing like forest fire in the clean light of the new day: no pale sandy tresses, but rich, vivid, Titian red. Nowhere in it showed dark streak or telltale kink.

"Listen," he countered. "Did you ever hear of a crowd of men—white and red and black—who went out through the Gap over yonder and brought in women and made slaves of them?"

At once her friendly face turned cold.

"You're huntin' into the wrong place," she told him, lifting her chin. "Our fellers don't do that. You better look somewheres else."

"Oh, shucks! Can't you get rid of that idea that I'm hunting somebody? These desperadoes were all dead long before we were born. But haven't you heard some such story from the old folks?"

After watching his frank face a moment she shook her head.

"No, never heard tell of such a thing. If they're all dead, what's the good of worryin' about 'em anyway?"

He shrugged and moved on toward the charred

sticks, meanwhile turning the conversation into another channel.

"How's the ankle?"

She probed under the blanket, threw the covering aside, pushed herself up, and took a tentative step.

"Why, by mighty, mister! You're a reg'lar doctor! It's sore, but it ain't half as bad as 'twas. It hurt terrible last night when I ——"

She stopped abruptly, but her eyes went to the entrance.

"When you came and covered me up? Serves you right. That was the most foolish thing—but I thank you, just the same."

Her lips opened, but for a moment no word came. Her eyes still were fixed on the narrow slit, and a little frown of concentration furrowed her brow. He pivoted and squinted against the glare of the rising sun now darting in at that crack. Then she spoke—low and tense.

"Where's your gun? Layin' there?"

"Yes."

"Go git it!"

He sprang for the passage, where the weapon still lay beside his discarded blanket. As he moved he heard a badly balanced stone outside grate under the weight of a moving body.

In a bounding rush he was across the open cavern and between the bowlders. With a swoop he snatched up his gun. His clutching hand closed with one finger inside the trigger-guard.

Before he realized that he was pressing the little

curved lever, the gun jumped violently backward. A thundering report smashed out. Powder-gas stung his throat. The firearm fell with a sullen *clack* on the stones beside his feet.

Vaguely his deafened ears received the echo of the shot roaring along the farther wall of the Traps, a mile away. He felt, rather than heard, something fall among the rocks outside.

Grabbing the gun again, he slipped forward to the entrance. At the corners of the upstanding bowlders he halted short, staring at a huddled form which had collapsed among the prone blocks beyond.

Only the head and upper torso of the stranger were visible, his lower body and legs lying behind a slanting stone. But clear in the sunlight showed a wan, pinched young face, swarthy-skinned, with close-cropped black hair. Along the stone under the head crept a red trickle.

Suddenly Douglas was thrown aside. From behind him Marion darted, wild-eyed. From her pale lips broke a sharp cry: "Steve!"

Across the stones she struggled. Beside the youth she dropped. Then she turned to Douglas a face startling in its white wrath.

"You—murderin'—hound!" she choked. "You've kilt him!"

CHAPTER IV

THE FUGITIVE

DUMB, Douglas leaned his gun against the wall and moved outward.

"Don't you touch him!" blazed Marion. "Don't you put a hand onto him or I'll—I'll use that gun onto you! I might have knowed you was lyin'—if I'd knowed Steve was out I'd never trusted a word you said. Now you've got him, leave him to be buried where he was borned. Oh, Steve, Stevie lad! And I—I give this feller the word to git his gun and do for you! If I'd only knowed you was out! Oh, Stevie boy!"

In a storm of grief she dropped her head on the thin chest, hugging the limp lad to her with convulsive strength. A few feet away the blond man halted, dazed by the unintentional tragedy and the violence of the girl's outburst. For minutes he stood there motionless, hardly grasping the significance of her denunciation.

Then his brain began to work. Her words, repeating themselves, became appallingly plain. This young Steve was "out"—and his swarthy pallor was not merely that of unconsciousness or death: it was that of long confinement in some place whence he had just escaped—a place where hair was kept cropped. And he, Douglas Hampton, who had been half ac-

cepted by this girl as the chance camper he claimed to be, now had become in her mind a far blacker monster than a mere "detective"—a merciless bloodhound who killed poor fugitives on sight. Gazing miserably on the mountain maid mourning her luckless boy lover, he found the sight unendurable. His head drooped, and his eyes rested unseeing on the stones between him and the pathetic pair.

Up overhead fluttered the yellowhammers, scared by the shot but emboldened by the ensuing silence to wheel about and whet their curiosity in scrutiny of the tragic group on the stones. High on the cliff behind, an unseen squirrel fussed and fumed; and from crack and cranny along the wall and from crevices among the fallen fragments more than one furtive little eye peered out. Steadily the sun slipped upward in the clean blue sky, lighting up in pitiless nakedness one more spectacle such as it had seen all too often in the long stretch of time since men first penetrated into this grim gulf. The wretched man neither heard nor saw any of these things. Stone-still he stood, staring down at a spattered splotch of white on a gray rock.

All at once his blank gaze focused sharply on that white spot. He started. In one stride he was beside the rock. As he stooped and squinted, a light flamed in his face. With a bound he was up and leaping toward the limp form beyond.

"Git away!" shrilled Marion, lifting a tear-swollen face and turning on him like a tigress. "Keep your bloody hands off him—he's mine! My onliest ——"

"Listen to me!" he commanded. "I never hit him!

The shot struck that stone yonder—the whole charge! It was an accident anyway—and he was out of line—the shot couldn't hit him from where I stood. Let me see that wound."

For an instant she sat rigid, unable to believe, yet thrilled with hope. Quickly, but gently, he raised the head of the youth and probed the injury he found. Then he nodded vehemently.

"This is no gunshot wound," he asserted. "It's a cut and a bump. He tumbled and knocked his head against a stone. Got a hard crack, but nothing dangerous. Poor kid, he looks half starved, and that smash he took just finished him—for awhile. All he needs is water, food, rest, and safety. I'll give him all of them."

After one stare at the split scalp now turned toward her, she sprang up, her cheeks aglow with joy. But then she paused and shot a glance at the gun near by.

"And you'll take him back! No you won't—I'll ——"

In the nick of time he caught her wrist as she started toward the weapon.

"Take him back where?" he snapped. "I'll take him nowhere, except back among the rocks. After he's able to walk he can go where he likes. He's nothing to me. If he's anything to you, don't stand in his way. I'm trying to help him. Now behave!"

She was tugging furiously away, but as he released her she stood where she was, fighting now against her distrust of him. He lifted the sagging body, got a

firm grip, and lurched back toward the cliff. As he passed the shot-scarred stone he grunted and jerked his head downward toward it. Following, she paused an instant and studied the white patch, glanced at the little cañon, then moved on with clearer face. She knew well how shot-marks looked; saw, too, that the tall stranger had spoken truth when he said Steve was out of his line of fire from the walled passage. Though she had not seen the gun fired, she realized now that hardly any man would have made so poor a shot if he had actually been trying to hit the hunted youth.

Yet, when Douglas edged into the slit and bore his burden through, she halted behind him and put a tentative hand on the gun, still loaded in one barrel. Narrowly she inspected the "newfangled" weapon—so unlike the ancient muzzle-loaders common in the Traps—wavering between a desire to draw its remaining charge and fear lest it might disastrously explode again. After a dubious moment she shook her head and went on. She must trust this man, whether she would or not.

Down on the tumbled blanket and the bough-tip bed Douglas laid the youth. Then he reached for the canvas water-pail. Its lightness brought a frown to his brow. Hardly a cupful remained in it.

"I'll git somethin'," she volunteered, reading his thought. Before he could fathom her purpose she was leaving through the passage, limping a little but moving as if sure of herself. Presently she returned, carefully bearing a jug.

"Well, you witch! Where did you dig up that?"

"That's one of the questions you better not ask round here," she parried. "Jest hold up his head while I give him a good snort."

Smiling grimly, he raised the lad's head and opened his lax mouth while she pulled the corn-cob plug. Deftly she put the nozzle to that mouth and poured the "snort." The aptness of the word was speedily demonstrated by the uncouth noise which erupted from Steve.

His eyes flew open, rolled, blinked. He coughed, sprayed a mouthful of the colorless but powerful liquor on his helpers, gasped, and struggled up as if kicked out of sleep. Wildly he stared at the two faces so near his. Then, as the girl put the jug again to his mouth, he grabbed it with both hands and gulped thirstily. When he lowered the vessel he licked his lips, and across them flitted a faint grin.

"Gawd, am I dead or dreamin'?" he breathed hoarsely. "Marry! Be ye there? An' this here licker—I'm a dunkey if 'tain't real! Who—who's this feller?"

His brown eyes glared into the cool blue ones. Involuntarily his right hand gripped the jug-handle as if it were a gun-stock. His gaunt face tightened into a menacing mask. He wavered like a mortally wounded wildcat gathering its last strength to spring.

"I'm all right, Steve," soothed Douglas. "I'm not after you. You're safe, and this is Marry, and that's real stuff in the jug. Calm down."

Under the steadying influence of the quiet tone the

youth relaxed a little. Yet his lined mouth remained set as he demanded: "Who shot at me?"

"Nobody," Douglas told him. "My gun exploded accidentally. I didn't even see you. You fell and cracked your head."

The boy still glowered suspiciously, but when Marion spoke his gaze shifted to her.

"That's right, Steve. You're all right, 'cept a little cut and a bump. Tell me quick—how long you been out? Are they after you?"

A savage smile twisted the thin mouth.

"I dunno if they're trackin' me—I reckon so. I ain't seen 'em. I got 'way Monday night, an' I ain't goin' back till I git Snake Sanders. Cuss him, he put me away—an' I never done it, Marry, I never! It was Snake done it! An' I got the blame. Three years I been doin' time—but I'll take them three years outen him quick's I git to a gun! Yas, an' all the rest of his life too! I'll ——"

"Don't you! He'll git you, not you git him. You might's well try to git a copperhead by grabbin' onto him with your bare hands. And you've got to keep out till the officers quit huntin'—they'll be into here, if they ain't here now. Don't you go near the house or a gun—don't move or make a noise till I tell you, or you're a goner! Now gimme that jug and I'll put it back. We've got to go quick to some other hide-out—there's been shootin' up here and we don't know who'll come—gimme that jug!"

"Not till I git 'nother big snort under my shirt,"

refused Steve, lifting the jug in unsteady hands. "I ain't et much for four days, an' ——"

"Gimme that jug!" she stormed. "Know whose it is? Snake's!"

The boy started as if stung. His grip relaxed, and she yanked the jug from him and grabbed up the corn-cob. Douglas noticed, in an absent way, that the clay was smeared with a streak of green paint.

"Snake's? I been drinkin' that varmint's licker?" raged Steve. "I'd ruther lap up p'ison! Gimme that jug back! I'll bust it!"

"No you won't!" She backed off. "He's right round here now somewheres, I shouldn't wonder, a-sneakin' and a-slidin' along, and you've got to lay low awhile—you ain't even got a gun. I'm goin' to put this right back where 'twas. You keep quiet."

She hobbled away. Steve struggled to rise and overtake her, but found himself powerless in the grip of Douglas.

"Cool off, Steve," advised the blond man. "Think what a joke this is on Snake—you drinking up his licker. Wouldn't it make him mad?"

A sudden hard grin split the pallid face. Steve sank back.

"That's right, too—uh—what's yer name?"

"Call me Hamp."

"Hamp. Good 'nough. I dunno ye, an' ye don't b'long round here, but ye act right. Got anything to eat, Hamp? I been goin' a long time, an' it's 'most took the tuck outen me."

He began to blink a little uncertainly. The "licker"

was fast getting in its work on his woefully empty stomach.

"Got a can of beans and some water, and they're yours."

"Gimme 'em!"

The demand crackled like an electric spark. The hard-set visage turned ravenous, and the wiry frame lifted itself and set its back against the wall. When Douglas tendered the opened can it was snatched and a quarter of its contents dumped into a grimy hand. An instant later the whole handful had been wolfed down and another was being stuffed into a fast-working mouth. When Marion came limping back from her mysterious pilgrimage only an empty tin and greasy lips remained to tell what had happened.

Unspeaking, the blond man opened another bean-can, put in a tin spoon, and handed it to the girl. She sank on a stone and began eating eagerly, but far more daintily than the boy. Douglas watched silently, but he nodded as he noted the instinctive difference in her way of feeding herself. Steve also watched, but with a different thought.

"Marry, ye're gittin' awful purty," he vouchsafed. "When I went 'way ye was thin's a rail, but now ye're han'some as a little red wagon. Ain't ye got a kiss for me?"

"Not till you wash your face, you dirty thing," she composedly answered. He grinned and wiped his mouth on a tattered sleeve much too big for him. "Where'd you git the clothes?" she demanded.

"Them?" He glanced down at threadbare coat,

thin shirt, and ragged overalls. "Found 'em into fellers' barns down yender. Hid my pen-clo'es into one feller's hay. Purty smart, hey?"

"Smart! Don't you know the officers'll track you that way? They will, sure's you're livin'."

"They'll have a job findin' me now I've got here," he muttered, though plainly disconcerted. "'Less'n somebody blabs."

Brown eyes and gray eyes switched to the quiet man who sat taking it all in.

"Don't worry," said he. "I haven't seen you folks at all—either of you."

After a narrow stare Steve nodded slightly. Not another word was spoken until the meagre meal was finished and the water-bag was totally empty. Then Marion took command of the situation.

"We'll be goin' now," she stated, rising. "No, don't come with us. Steve and me, we'll go 'long by our own selves, and then you won't know what's 'come of us if anybody should ask you. We're awful obliged to you, stranger, and we wish you good luck. G'by."

"I'm not saying good-bye. I'm staying here, as I told you before. Maybe we'll meet again."

She took several halting steps outward before responding, Steve trailing silently behind her. At the edge of the cañon she paused and spoke over one shoulder.

"If you're stayin', don't stay *here*. It's no place for you. You'll be better off down below. There's Jake Dalton's place, down towards the Clove, where

nobody lives any more, and you could go into there and live pretty safe and comf'table if you mind your own business—and if the ha'nt don't git you."

"Oho! A haunted house!"

"So folks say. Jake, he got kilt last spring by somethin'—nobody knows what. They found him after he'd been dead a week or so, and they couldn't look at him right close. But he wasn't shot or cut or clawed—he was jest swelled up terrible. Two or three fellers stayed into his house since, and they got drove out—somethin' was there that they didn't see, but they could hear it and *feel* it. Some say it's Jake's ha'nt. Others say it ain't Jake but the thing that kilt him. If you want to try livin' there nobody's likely to bother you much. It sets on the left of the Clove road, down yonder, with two big pines back of it.

"Now we're goin'. Oh, and one other thing—you better not come round Nigger Nat's house. He ain't sociable. G'by."

Out through the crack they passed. For a minute or two the blond man sat looking moodily at the exit. Then he arose and followed.

The rocks outside were vacant. The trees and undergrowth showed no sign of life. Even the curious yellowhammers were gone. Nowhere, except on two stones—one scarred by shot, one stained with blood—was anything to show that since the last sunset two young hill-folk had come suddenly into the life of Douglas Hampton and as swiftly vanished from it.

"Well," he muttered, picking up his gun and turn-

ing back, "Steve, you tough young wolf, you don't know how lucky you are. I only hope you'll treat her right in the years to come."

CHAPTER V

CREEPING THINGS

Up on the brink of Dickie Barre, on a triangular outcrop of stone bare of brush but topped by whispering pines, Douglas lounged in luxurious content, basking in the mellow warmth of September sun.

Behind him his pack leaned against the base of a pine. Beside him lay his gun. Before him stretched the long panorama of the Traps.

From the half-naked rock of Millbrook Mountain, where the rim of the great bowl curved westward to merge into the Minnewaska steeps, to the castle-like peak of Sky Top, beneath which the strange lake of Mohonk nestled out of sight in a cup of sheer stone, rambled the top of the Great Wall. Northward from Sky Top it dipped downward in a long sweep, and there the east-swinging wall of Dickie Barre seemed to close in and complete the unbroken ring of uplands surrounding the forested chasm. But the man loafing up on the breezy point knew that such was not the case.

Though he had not yet traveled in that direction, he had been studying a couple of squares of Government topographic map, of which several were in his ditty-bag; and he knew that the walls did not close. They pinched together into a narrow ravine, then

veered apart again, each pursuing its own way into the north until it became only a series of rounded knolls sinking into the other low hills beyond. And that ravine, or perhaps the wider valley floor beyond, must be the Clove of which Marion Oaks had spoken.

Through that ravine and on into the north, the map said, ran a road—the inside road of the Traps; and along that road-line, at wide intervals, were the little square symbols which, to the topographer, signify "houses." One of those dots must be the house where Jake Dalton had lived before he was found "swelled up terrible"; where now even the hard sons of the craggy hills dared not sleep because of the fearful thing which could not be seen but could be felt. Before sundown, the lone blond man intended, he would find that house and see whether it was fit for habitation. If so, he meant to inhabit it, ha'nt or no ha'nt.

Everything impelled him toward that house. To live continuously among the bowlders where he had stayed last night was neither comfortable nor sensible: the place was too far from water, from food, from human associates; and when the drenching fall rains should come, as they might at any time, he would be almost unprotected. For sinister purposes, for the concealment of nameless activities and of wanted men, the maze of cliff-blocks was ideal; but for the steady residence of a man who dodged neither lawmakers nor lawbreakers it was the reverse. And to a red-blooded, two-handed fellow like Douglas Hampton the story of the uncanny house was enough. Had it been an even poorer place than his rocky lair, he would

have journeyed thither to seek the solution of its mystery.

But the day was far from old, and there was time to loaf and look and bask and think, unworried by necessity. Here was none of the rush and drive of the city, the scurry to fill assignments, the fret and fume of the hordes of business-slaves hurtling overground and underground in ant-like activity. Here was nothing to do but relax, absorbing the golden sunlight and the green beauty of nature and the clinking music of unseen hammers far below and far away on the Mohonk slope, where millstone-makers were rifting rock in their little quarries. What though one had no habitation? What though his food was almost gone and the pipe dangling from the corner of his mouth was empty? Time enough to seek shelter when night approached; time enough to rustle for food when the last crumb had vanished. Now was the hour to let his city-starved soul feast on freedom.

So he leaned there on an elbow, blinking outward and downward at the varying verdure of the hardwood forests, the red spots of sumach and the orange tips of goldenrod brightening the little fields, the tiny houses dotting the openings, the little ribbons of smoke drifting away from their chimneys. His thoughts moved in a slow circle—from Marion to Steve, from Steve to the haunted house, from the haunted house to the legend of the long-dead outlaw gang, from the gang to its women prisoners, and so back again to Marion. Where was she now? Down in one of those houses, beaten and sworn at for running away? Much

nearer, still talking with her escaped-convict lover in the "hide-out" to which she had taken him? Limping along somewhere in the masking brush, forgetful of pain, thinking only of bringing food to the worn-out fugitive? Only the labyrinth below could tell; and it was not in the habit of telling tales about its children.

And this Snake Sanders, who had wriggled out of the way of officers and let a boy suffer the penalty of some unknown crime—who and what was he? The thinker, accustomed to studying faces and voices, felt that Steve's denial of guilt and denunciation of Snake were genuine. His virulent hatred, his vicious threat against that man, were those of the bitterly wronged. Yet Marion, herself swift-tempered and courageous, had shown that she feared this Snake, who might be a-sneakin' and a-slidin' along near at hand ——

The blond man grew tense. Something *was* sneaking along, though not very near. Something was creeping stealthily toward him from the thick growth behind; something which made no footfall, but which caused a slight difference in the rustling of the breeze-kissed leaves.

He started to turn his head, then checked the movement. He felt that he would see nothing: that the creature was traveling with Indian stealth, keeping itself masked; that his look behind would only warn the sinister thing that its approach was known. He was lying dangerously close to the edge, and his nerves shouted to him to get back while there was time. But he held himself where he was.

His eyes flicked downward at his gun. Then he

carelessly raised himself to a sitting position, took his pipe from his mouth and glanced at it, put it back, and let his hand stray down to his shirt pocket. It hovered there a moment, then sank loosely as if empty. But cupped in his palm now was a little round mirror.

Casual though his movements had been, the soft rustle of progress had ceased. Only the little flutterings caused by wandering air-currents came to him. As he sat still, however, apparently absorbed in contemplation of the scene below, it recommenced. Slowly, imperceptibly, he turned his hand, slanting the mirror up and down by degrees, watching it from the corner of his eye. It was a schoolboy trick which he had used more than once in later years when desirous of seeing something behind without turning his head. And now, listening keenly and moving the tell-tale glass with practised hand, he soon located the advancing thing behind the pine, some ten feet away, where his pack lay.

It was creeping now on the ground, free from the brush beyond but still unseen; keeping itself concealed behind pack and pine, making only a slight slither as it came. The sound died. For a long minute all was quiet. Then, slowly, above the edge of the pack rose a hat.

Shapeless, dingy felt it was, with a ragged hole below its crown. Under its brim glimmered black eyes, beady and cold as those of a reptile. Little by little the nose came up into view—a flat, wide nose with something of the triangularity of a snake's head.

There it poised, mouth and jaw hidden behind the bulk of the pack.

The opaque eyes fixed greedily on the new shotgun lying beside the watcher's leg. Then they returned to the back and shoulders of the blond man, and the lids narrowed into wicked slits. The nose drew downward, the eyes followed, the hat faded. Above the pack nothing showed except the low branches of the pine.

Little sounds of movement came—of movement but not of advance. Douglas moved the mirror to right and left of the lump of blankets. His fingers grew rigid. Something had appeared beside the pack—a light but strong box, from which a dirty black-haired hand was lifting a lid. As that lid arose the box was tilted so that its top became an open side, facing toward the man on the brink. And out from it crawled a big copperhead.

Head raised, it glided forward a foot or two and stopped, its tail still in the box, which lay motionless. Its venomous eyes focused on the still figure of the man beyond, who remained as rigid as the rock on which he sat. Its tongue ran out and vibrated in menace. Slowly it slipped forward a little farther, then paused again. Douglas braced himself to snatch up his gun, whirl, and fire the instant its approach was resumed. But it was not resumed.

Instead, the repulsive creature lay quiet, absorbing the warmth of rock and sun. Minutes passed, and it made no move. Then from beyond the pack came a faint sibilant sound—an almost inaudible noise which

was not hiss nor breath nor whistle, but something of all three, and which seemed to arouse the reptile. It turned, and crept sluggishly toward the spot whence the sound had come.

Twice that indescribable sibilance was repeated, and the snake moved on in its deliberate, fat-bodied way. Just then a sudden gust of wind swooped playfully along the brink, startling the leaves into a flapping chorus like the beating wings of trapped birds. The hideous thing on the ground slid around the pack, paused, was gone.

Douglas drew a long breath and became aware that his shirt was clammy with cold perspiration. A chill shivered down his back. Moving the glass, he scanned all around and above that pack. Nothing showed. The gust of wind fled along on its frolicsome way, and all grew quiet. No sound came from behind the pine.

Still controlling his movements, he looked casually around, then arose as if tired of sitting. As he stood up, however, his gun was in one hand, and he loosely swung its twin muzzles to cover the pack. Feigning a yawn, he stepped lazily toward the pine, dropping the mirror into a trousers pocket as he moved. With a quiet click his safety catch slid, and two solid charges—of buckshot—were ready for instant use.

A good stride away from the blankets he turned aside and drifted around the butt of the pine. Then he halted, sorely puzzled. The man who should have been lurking there was not. The box, too, had vanished. Not even the snake ——

But yes, the snake was there. It was curled just below and behind the pack, hidden from any eye except one searching for it; three feet of silent death, ready to strike its fangs into the hands of the man stooping to lift his back-burden before slinging it on his shoulders. Even now, with that man's eye on it, it was poising in venomous alertness, its tongue vibrating again like a blur.

Douglas stepped onward a little, lifted his gun, and fired. The snake rolled writhing away, blown apart. Instantly he wheeled, the other barrel ready to meet any menace. But still nothing showed itself. The growth beyond seemed empty.

Warily watching, he stepped to his pack, swung it up one-handed, and stood a minute longer scanning his surroundings. Seeing nothing new, he got into the straps and strode away. Only a few rods to his left, he knew, ran a faint trail—the path by which he had come here after finding a steep slope which had enabled him to climb Dickie Barre. The trail would be empty, of course; the skulking assassin in the felt hat would be so cunningly hidden in the encompassing tangle that no mere stranger could find him. No use hunting him.

But as he emerged into that path he stopped, startled. There, only a few feet away, stood the man.

So astounded by the other's audacity was Douglas that he stood gaping. The sinister hillman grinned guilelessly.

"Howdy, stranger!" he greeted. "Scairt ye, did I? Was that ye a-shootin' jest now?"

Douglas swallowed an impulse to leap at him. Still amazed, he glanced rapidly over him. Below the ophidian eyes and flat nose which he had seen before, he now noted a coarse mouth, tobacco-yellowed teeth, scraggly black beard about a week old, long lean frame, and nondescript garments. His curving hands were empty. His snake-box was not with him now. Nor had he any gun.

The man moved slightly, shifting a foot. In the movement was something reptilian—a sinuous smoothness that was serpentine. And in the short sentences which he had just spoken was a repellent hiss.

"Howdy yourself!" growled Douglas. "What are you doing here?"

"Jest a-ramblin' round, stranger. Might ast ye the same. What was ye shootin'?"

"Snake." Douglas gave him a hard look.

"Yeh? Huh! Awful waste o' powder. Us fellers use sticks onto them things. Thought mebbe ye got what ye're into here for."

A cunning wink followed his last utterance.

"Meaning?"

The yellow teeth bared themselves in a wide, silent laugh. But the beady eyes held no mirth.

"Think I dunno ye? Huh! I ain't no fool. Ye ain't here jest to look at rocks an' things. Trouble is, ye dunno this kentry an' how to work it. None o' ye do. Everybody into the place knowed days ago ye was here, an' ye'll never git yer man 'less'n ye do business. I'm the feller to do business with."

Again the cunning wink.

"Meaning?" repeated Douglas.

"Huh! Ye know. We'll work shares. I'll toll yer man to ye for half the reward. Who d'ye want? How much's he wuth?"

The blond man bit back a sudden desire to grin.

"Who are you?" he countered.

"Me? Snake Sanders."

CHAPTER VI

THE KNOCK-OUT

Douglas deliberately swung the pack from his back and dropped it. Against it he leaned his gun, making sure, as he did so, that he had restored the safety-lock. As he faced Snake Sanders he caught the black eyes fixed again on the weapon, and in them glinted the same light of cupidity which had been there before.

"Right purty gun ye've got, stranger," Snake admired. "Don't look sensible, though, without no hammers onto it. What's one o' them guns cost?"

"Oh, several dollars. But what about this business of yours?"

"It's like I tell ye." Snake dragged his gaze away from the shotgun. "Do business with me an' ye'll git what ye want. Otherways ye git nothin'—but trouble."

"So? And who'll make the trouble? You?"

"Me? Huh! I don't have to. Ye'll jest fall into it."

"Fall into it. Sure it won't come crawling up on me from behind?"

The black lashes flickered.

"What ye mean by that?"

"Your name's Snake."

Sanders' beady stare beat into his inscrutable face.

Presently the serpentine man grinned and subtly relaxed.

"Names don't hurt. Think I'd try to do ye after I got my money, mebbe? That ain't my way, stranger. Folks calls me Snake 'cause I can handle snakes. They don't never bite me. I can tromp right round 'em into my bare feet, an' pick 'em up into my bare hands, an' they lemme alone. I can talk to 'em—snake talk—an' they mind. If I'd of been over yender 'fore ye kilt that snake o' yourn, now, I could have sent him away jest by talkin' to him."

His gaze never wavered as he talked. He gave no sign of guilt. Unaware that he had been observed in the little round mirror, he was sure there was nothing to connect him in this man's mind with the fact that a copperhead had lurked beside the pack, and he was bold enough to make capital of the presence of that reptile. Evidently he was proud both of his name and his diabolical gift.

"Ye must have hearn o' me," he went on. "I've done business before. Nobody round here knows it, o' course. I keep my tracks covered. But they must have told ye outside 'bout Snake Sanders. I'm him."

Douglas kept the disgust out of his face. He wanted to know just how deep was this man's duplicity. He had not yet learned that it was absolutely bottomless.

"I've heard the name. People around here don't monkey with you much, do they?"

A hissing laugh came through the yellow teeth, and for once the eyes showed a glint of amusement.

"No they don't. I've got this hull place right into my hand, mister. Folks step wide o' me. Some fellers has got brash an' throwed buckshot at me, but they don't no more. They're dead. Others has learnt."

"I see. Those fellows stepped on snakes, maybe?"

"Mebbe. I ain't sayin'. But come on, stranger, we can't talk here all day. Who d'ye want? How much?"

"I think," was the slow answer, "that the party I'm interested in just now is out of reach."

Snake looked blank. Reaching smoothly into a pocket, he drew out a plug of tobacco, bit off a chunk, and chewed.

"Got away clean, ye mean. Ain't into here nowheres? Huh! Don't be too sure. There's lots o' hide-outs into here that ye dunno 'bout. I know 'em. I can git anybody—man, woman, or chile. An' there's more'n one way to skin a skunk. If yer man ain't too well knowed, why won't 'nother man do?"

Again the insinuating wink.

"Meaning?"

"Aw, come off! Ye know. Fix it onto some feller we can git. Take him out, fix up yer case, railroad him an' git yer money. Think I dunno how you detectives work? Ye must think I'm simple. It's done right 'long—grab a feller that ain't got no friends an' send him up. What chance has a feller here got when he gits drug into the courts outside? Puh!" He expectorated profusely and waited.

Douglas laughed out in contempt. He took a couple

of slow strides forward. Snake shifted again, and his eyes narrowed once more.

"You're barking up the wrong tree," the blond man derided. "I'm no detective. I'm hunting nobody. I'm in here for—my health. See?"

Snake saw—or thought he did. Instantly he changed front.

"I knowed it. Ye needn't jump onto me, now. I was jest a-tryin' ye out. If ye was a real detective ye'd be down snoopin' round houses, not a-hidin' out up here. Wal, ye come to the right place, stranger. Where ye from? What'd ye do? Go on, tell a feller. I'll keep it dark. Got money, o' course. Gimme some an' I'll fetch ye all the feed ye want."

"And fetch the officers along too, when they come."

"Aw no. That talk I jest give ye was all moonshine—not a true word into it. I was jest makin' sure o' ye, I tell ye. Now I know ye I'll ——"

"Shut up!" Hampton's anger broke out. "I've been making sure of you, too. You're a liar. You're a treacherous sneak. You'd sell a hunted man to me—you'd sell an innocent man to me—you'd sell me, too. You think I'm after somebody, eh? Well, you're right. I'm after the man who thought he was going to get my gun and money, the man who didn't get them and is trying to trap me now, the man who sneaked up and let that copperhead out of the box! I'm after Snake Sanders! And I've got him!"

So rapid had been his words, so swift was his following leap, that Snake stood flat-footed as a big fist

smacked into his face. He was knocked headlong backward.

Into the bushes he sprawled with a crash of breaking branch and twig. Into the bushes Douglas jumped after him. But Sanders, though dazed by the impact of the blow and the shock of finding himself caught, was neither senseless nor helpless. He wriggled over and seemed to curve upward. Head-first, like a striking reptile, he threw himself at the legs of the man above. His punisher lurched over him and fell.

Snake's lean frame wriggled forward again and started up. But he was not quite free. Without waiting to rise, Douglas darted a hand backward and clamped it around one bare ankle. Holding his grip, he rolled over, twisting and yanking the trapped leg.

The hillman tottered and lost his footing. But even before he hit the ground for the second time he lashed out in air with his free foot. His heel thumped into the blond man's face, snapping his head back like a fist-blow. Hissing furiously, Snake jerked up his leg and let drive again. The fierce foot-punch missed this time, for its mark had ducked aside and the leg shot over Douglas' shoulder. Promptly it was seized, held, forced down.

Both men now were in a grotesque posture for fighting. Snake's legs were spread, with his antagonist sitting between them and clutching a foot on each side, while Snake himself sat on one booted ankle, pinning it down. But the advantage was decidedly with Sanders, for both his hands were free. He shot them straight for the other's throat.

His arms were struck up and his savage clutch failed. His feet were freed, but the hands which had gripped them now were fists, shooting short-arm jolts into his jaw. And, short though those blows were, they crunched his teeth together with a force that made him blink groggily and throw himself aside.

An instant later he found himself grappled. Douglas was clinching him, shoving him down, striving for a leg-hold with his knees and relentlessly forcing one of his arms up behind his back. Douglas' eyes were ablaze with wrath and his jaw set like a rock. Now he had this treacherous reptile in a real grip, and he meant to smash it. And Snake, reading the grim purpose in the face of the man against whose back he had loosed creeping death, felt fear stab through him.

Heretofore the sinister hillman had fought only in a flurry of surprise and rage—though he would not have neglected to make his work complete if once he got the upper hand. Now the fury of desperation fired him. He snaked himself over sidewise, wriggled a leg loose, twined it around the booted leg beside it, and, by a curling twist, eased the strain on his pinioned arm. His yellow fangs fixed themselves in his enemy's shoulder. His free hand clawed for the blue eyes.

Douglas released his arm-hold, evaded the gouging nails by a backward jerk of the head, got both hands to his foe's throat, tore him loose. Both scrambled to their knees and up on their feet. Both struck with savage fists at the same instant. Both blows landed.

Squarely between the eyes Snake's knotty fist

cracked. Douglas saw a red flash, followed by floating rings of flame. His own knuckles tingled from their impact with a bristly chin. Vaguely he saw the face beyond the wavering fire-spots fade backward. His other fist, swinging for it, hit nothing.

For an instant he dug his knuckles into his eyes, trying to clear his sight. Then he squinted around. Snake was down again, clawing at the ground, trying to rise. He jumped for him—stubbed a toe against an unnoticed rock—stumbled and sprawled.

As he pushed himself up, raging, Snake got to his haunches and lurched at him in a clinch. Douglas threw himself into the wiry arms and grappled for a hold of his own. And then for a few minutes it was a straining, kicking, punching rough-and-tumble, each fighting with all he had.

Again and again each secured a throat-hold but lost it. Over they rolled, kicking whenever a foot came free, slugging with either fist or both, striving to dash each other's head against stone or root, heaving and wrenching until they had tumbled out of the brush and into the trail where they had first stood. In Douglas grew amazement at the strength and endurance of his antagonist. In Snake's brain gnawed a keener fear of the man on whom he had exhausted in vain every foul trick he knew. Neither could quite overcome the other. Both were gasping and growing dizzy from the violence of their combat. And they fought on.

Suddenly, in a final squirming spasm, Snake twisted himself free. Before Douglas could clutch him again

he had rolled away and was shoving himself up. The blond man got his feet under him and pitched to a stand. Then, too short of breath to renew the duel at once, they balanced themselves and glowered.

Snake was a hard sight, and Douglas was not much better. The hillman's face was gashed by cuts and smeared with mingled blood and tobacco-juice, his right eye was shut, his mouth was a blubbery pulp, his clothes hung in rags. The other's bloodshot eyes gleamed between puffy lids, his nose leaked a red drizzle, his light hair was stained from a cut scalp and full of dirt, his shirt was ripped to the waist and crimsoned at the shoulder where Snake's teeth had sunk. But neither saw anything except the menace in the other's eyes.

The same thought came to both—probably born in the vindictive brain of Snake and involuntarily transmitted by his look: the thought of the gun leaning against the pack. True, it was "newfangled," and Douglas knew it was locked against discharge; but in a fight a gun is not only a gun but a steel bar and a club. It was behind its owner, and a swift dash past him might make Snake its master. He attempted the dash.

Without the slightest preliminary movement he was speeding past Douglas. But the latter was not asleep. Pivoting on a heel, he swung a round-arm blow flush under the passing jaw.

The shock was terrific. Between the impetus of Snake's plunge and the body-drive of the punch, the impact was more than doubled. The slugging arm

dropped, numb to the shoulder. Snake also dropped —numb all over.

His feet left the ground, and he straightened backward in the air. Flat on his back he struck, arms at his sides, legs stretched nerveless, head a little to the right, blank face turned to the brush. There he lay without a quiver of life.

Douglas stood peering down, slowly swinging his numbed arm at his side. Minutes passed. His breathing grew normal; his arm lost its wooden feeling. Somewhere a bird chirped noisily. Up from the unseen chasm of the Traps idled a new breeze, bearing the music of the far-off hammers. The warm sun beat down on the two men. Still Snake Sanders lay motionless.

The swollen-eyed man above him trod tentatively on a grimy hand. It gave no answering twitch. He stooped, studied the face, put a thumb on the left lid, pushed it up, and peered at the eyeball. Then he stood up, unconsciously rubbing his thumb against his shirt.

"Well, Mister Snake Sanders," he said grimly, "if I were you and you were I, you'd drag me over to the edge and pitch me off to smash on the rocks, most likely. That's what I ought to do to you. But I don't happen to be built along those lines. Just what can a white man do with a reptile like you under such circumstances?"

The problem remained unanswered, though he ran a hand repeatedly through his thick hair and frowned down at the body.

"If I could only have hit you harder, maybe you'd die of a broken neck," he mused. "I've known such things to happen. But I did the best I could, and you'll live just the same. The devil takes care of his own, anyway."

Slowly he turned and walked to his pack. Deliberately he got into the straps, wincing as the injured shoulder came under pressure.

"Must wash that place well when I reach the creek," he muttered, "or I'll get blood-poisoning. Guess a complete bath wouldn't be inappropriate."

He settled the pack, gripped his gun, stepped to the edge of the brush, and picked up his hat. Then he looked again at the silent Snake.

"On the whole, I think I have a good deal the best of it," he declared. "Your little copperhead trick did me no harm, and I know a lot more now than if you hadn't tried it. Yes, a whole lot. As for damages to our respective complexions and temperaments, I'm no worse off than you; and in the matter of general condition you're certainly much worse than I. So we'll call it quits—for the present."

He plodded away. But after a few steps he looked back with a hard smile.

"Besides," he concluded, "I was forgetting. Our young friend Steve has some business to settle with you. His account is three years old—maybe more—and mine has only just begun. So you're Steve's meat, Snake. Steve's meat."

CHAPTER VII

A MAN MEETS A MAN

ALONG the Clove road plodded a man with a battered face and a torn shirt, toting a pack and a gun. The face was not so much disfigured as it had been awhile ago, for it had just been laved in the cold, clear water of Coxing Kill; but it still bore obvious marks of conflict, chief of which was a pair of puffy eyes ringed by darkening discolorations. The rent shirt gaped at every stride, disregarded by its wearer, who swung along as if careless of the opinions of others. Judging from his gait, he knew where he was going and purposed to reach his destination before early sundown should cut off the light from his ridge-flanked road.

Behind him, perhaps a quarter-mile back, another man was riding in the same direction on the same road. A big-framed, eagle-nosed, long-jawed old man he was, with white mustache drooping around his mouth and ragged wisps of snowy hair sticking out from under his nondescript felt hat. His shoulders, though humped up as he lounged forward on the reins lying loosely along the back of a white horse, were wide and bulky; and the gnarled hands holding those reins were corded with sinew. Seventy if a day, he still looked powerful enough to handle many a man

of half his years; and the direct gaze of his steely blue eyes betokened fearlessness of heart, simplicity of nature, and honesty of soul.

Neither of the two men saw the other. Between them intervened windings of the tree-lined road; the tramping man cast no glance behind, and the one following was not looking for him. Each in his own little cloud of dust, the pair ambled on and drew steadily nearer to a dingy house, behind which a man and a woman were harvesting corn.

At the swinging approach of the pack-bearer the couple halted their toil and squinted at him. He waved a jaunty hand. Neither of the harvesters answered the friendly gesture. In slouching attitudes they stood, wooden-faced, watching him pass. With a careless smile he looked them over, then turned his gaze forward and ignored them.

Had he been let alone, he would have passed without a word and speedily forgotten them. But, though the couple made no threatening move, they had animals which did. With a sudden bound three dogs appeared from nowhere and silently rushed at him.

They were treacherous-looking mongrel beasts, and their teeth gleamed wickedly as they came. The man halted—took one comprehensive look—stepped back and lifted his gun.

"Call 'em off!" he barked. "Call 'em or bury 'em!"

A shrill shriek of command burst from the woman. A sour snarl broke from the man. At the sound of the shrewish voice and the menace of the gun the

dogs slowed abruptly. But they growled, and they did not turn back.

"Call 'em off, I said!" commanded the man behind the gun. "When I say off I mean off! Drive them back and tie them up!"

Instead, the man advanced, muttering. His brown face, of distinctly negro cast, was ugly; and he still gripped his corn-knife—an abbreviated scythe, short-handled, which would be a fearful weapon at close quarters. The dogs, emboldened by his approach, began slipping forward again.

"You can keep back too," the stranger warned. "This gun is likely to scatter right at you. Take those beasts away quick if you want them to live. I won't say it again."

"Shoot them dawgs an' ye won't git fur from here," the other snarled throatily. But he paused, and at the cessation of his steps the brutes also stopped. The woman still stood in the corn.

Just then the white horse and its white-haired driver came jogging around a bushy turn. The old man sat up with sudden energy, involuntarily jerking at the reins. The horse stopped.

One swift survey the old man took. Then his right hand shot to the whip-socket, and with awkward speed he clambered out into the road.

"Nat!" he yelled explosively. "Git them dawgs in or I'll give the hull pack o' ye a hidin'! Shoot 'em if ye want, stranger—they ain't none of 'em no good!"

Douglas, his finger already tightening on one trigger, held his fire and flicked a glance sidewise to see what

sort of man was coming. He found the old fellow running nimbly toward him, reversing his whip so that its heavy butt was foremost. At that instant the man Nat, his eyes glinting viciously, hissed at the dogs.

"Look ou-u-ut!" yelled the oncoming driver.

In the nick of time Douglas turned his eyes back—just as a dog left the ground in a fang-grinning leap. The other two were crouching. The blond man jerked his gun a little downward to meet the rising body. The dog's breast struck against the muzzles. Teeth clashed in a fierce snap. From the gun burst a muffled roar. The dog was blown backward.

Under the impact of dog and powder-recoil Douglas staggered. But he gave no ground and lost no time. His second finger released the other hidden hammer at an upshooting shape. In a crashing flare another hairy form whirled over and flopped to earth.

At the same instant teeth stung his left side. A sudden weight on his shirt yanked him almost off balance. Under his arm he found the wicked face of the third hound. Then a black streak appeared on that dog's head, a resounding thwack hit Douglas' ears, and the beast dangled limp, held up only by its teeth, which were caught in the cloth.

"I told ye, Nat—I told ye!" panted the old man, whose whip-butt had knocked out that third dog. "I been tellin' ye right 'long —— Git back, ye yeller hound!"

Mouthing an inarticulate oath, the owner of the dogs himself was now jumping forward, face convulsed and corn-hook lifted. Whether he was attacking Douglas

or his aged rescuer neither stopped to ascertain. Both acted. The empty shotgun jabbed for the assailant's face, the barrels crunching solidly against his forehead. The whip-butt swung down with the force of a blackjack on his crown. His eyes rolled, his legs caved, and he fell.

The young man and the old one swept their surroundings. Two dogs were fairly blown apart. The third still hung limp from Douglas' shirt. The man lay in a queer huddle, his corn-hook sticking in the ground beside him, where it had fallen on its point. The woman, shrieking with rage, now was running at them with a similar blade.

"I told ye, Nat," the old man said harshly, as if the fallen man could hear him, "if ye didn't learn them dogs manners or tie 'em up somebody'd fix 'em. I told ye I'd do it myself the next time they come for me. Ye can say g'by to this here one too."

Wherewith he clutched the dangling hound by the scruff of the neck and, in one wrench, tore it away from Douglas' shirt. He flung it down, hopped up, and landed with all his weight on the brute's neck. Under his heavy brogans sounded a crack of bones.

"'Lizy, ye better hold yer hosses," he coolly cautioned the woman, now close at hand. "I don't want to handle ye rough, but sure's God made little apples I'll crack ye one 'less'n ye drop that 'ere cawn-hook. I'm a-warnin' ye."

The thin-faced female, whose coarse hair and high cheek-bones hinted strongly at Indian blood, screamed out again. She burst into a torrent of vituperation

that brought a red wave across the face of the younger man and a corresponding flush into the leathery cheeks of his fighting-mate. But she made no attack with the ugly blade in her hand. Standing over the huddled Nat, her bony bare toes digging at the turf like the claws of a cat, she vented her fury in language which would have brought swift physical retaliation if she had been a man. And the pair stood silent and took it.

"Ye'll pay for them pups, Eb Wilham—ye'll pay dear!" she foamed at the last. "Nat'll take it outen ye! Him an' Snake'll fix ye—an' ye too, ye sneakin' 'tective! Ye mizzable pair o' sneakers, ye better live together an' sleep together an' watch out fer each other now!"

She bent and squinted at her mate. The two men looked suddenly at each other. The hillman stared as if seeing the other for the first time. The newcomer stared straight back, taking his first comprehensive view of the two-handed old fellow and realizing what the woman's threat signified. For a minute old blue eye and young blue eye held straight and steady. Then on each mouth quirked a smile.

"If you've run out of words, I'll say a few myself," clipped Douglas, turning to the woman. "If there's any more trouble coming from this it comes to me, not to him. I never saw him before, and he doesn't know me. So you can tell your nigger man to take it out on me. As for Snake, I knocked him cold awhile ago and I can do it again. I'll be around here for some time, and anybody wanting the same dose Snake got can come and get it. That's all."

He nodded to the old man and turned away. He took three steps before Eb Wilham stopped him.

"Hol' on!" the latter exploded in the abrupt way that seemed habitual. "I'm a-travelin' your way. If ye want a ride, set in. 'Lizy, git some sense. This feller's right—I dunno him. But I'm a-goin' to know him if he's willin'. An' as fur's Nat an' Snake's concerned, I been takin' care o' myself seventy-three year an' I figger to keep on doin' it. What say, stranger? Walk or ride?"

"Ride, if it doesn't get you into trouble," Douglas acquiesced.

"No trouble. Snakes an' yeller dawgs has bit at me before an' I ain't dead. Chk! Hoss, g'yapalong! G'yap, I tell ye!"

The white horse, sedately cropping grass, took a few last bites, and came obediently. His master climbed spryly into the weather-beaten wagon and rolled an equally weather-beaten thumb at the rear. Douglas heaved his pack in behind and swung himself to the seat beside the driver.

The sharp-faced female screamed out with a fresh burst of abuse. Old Eb's mouth tightened, and he lightly touched the horse with his whip. The animal jumped in an astonished way and began slowly, heavily pounding along the road. Woman, man, dogs and house disappeared behind in a drifting cloud of dust.

"Ain't no use listenin' or talkin' to a mad woman," Eb barked conversationally. "Ain't no use into it at all. Uh—right fine weather we're a-havin', stranger."

"Right fine," agreed Douglas. "Aren't you worried about riding with a detective, Mr. Wilham?"

The keen eyes shot at him and returned to the horse.

"Not a mite. I ride with who I want to. Folks that's scairt o' detectives mostly has some reason to be. I ain't got no reason."

"Found—one honest man in the Traps," laughed Douglas.

"That ain't nothin'," Eb retorted. "Folks is mostly honest round here. Good hard-workin' fellers. Don't jedge the rest of us by them Oakses. Or Snake Sanders. Did ye say ye licked Snake?"

Getting no answer at once, he took another survey of his passenger. Douglas was staring at the road. So the hard pair behind were "them Oakses"—the parents of the catamount girl!

"Er—oh, yes. Laid him out on top of that ledge back yonder. Ought to have thrown him off. But I didn't."

The horse thumped out a dozen steps while Eb digested this.

"Ye're right, stranger. Snake's a bad 'un. Ye must o' had a hard tussle—Snake ain't easy to handle." The shrewd eyes took in the battered face. "Up top o' Dickabar, hey? Hum!"

He became abstracted. The horse jogged on, steadily eating up distance. The silence grew strained.

"Mr. Wilham, I'm no detective," Douglas asserted. "I'm just a rambler who blundered in here. My name's Douglas Hampton. I'm not after anybody, and I'm staying awhile just because I like this country. I

don't know who started this fool story that I'm a detective, and I don't care much. But now I'm here, I'll stay until I'm ready to go—unless I get starved out; I haven't much left to eat. That's all there is to it. Believe it or not. It's true."

The heavy hoofs beat another measure.

"I believe ye," aggressively. "I know how ye feel. I'm full o' that same kind o' cussedness myself. There's some folks round here that's ignorant and scairt of any new feller, and there's some that's got reasons besides bein' ignorant. I ain't sayin' who they be; I ain't talkin' 'bout my neighbors even if I don't like some of 'em. But seein' it's gone round that ye're a detective, 'most everybody'll believe it, an' ye better act accordin'—kind o' go careful, I mean. Where ye stayin'? Anywheres special?"

"Up in the rocks last night. Thought I might find a house I could live in down here. Know of any?"

"Hum. Wal, we're a-comin' to a house, but I don't think ye'd want it. It's—uh—kind o' lonesome. Folks says there's some funny things into it. There 'tis now."

They emerged from a tunnel of trees, and Douglas looked at a house which he knew must be that of Jake Dalton. It was at the left of the road, in a clearing rank with uncut grass, behind which rose forest headed by two giant pines. It was a little box of a place, not more than twenty feet square; weather-worn, with patched roof and tiny sagging porch. The small bare windows gaped black and blank at the forest cordon. The door stood ajar, as if the latest occupant had left

in haste. About it hung an air of abandonment, of desolation, of forbidding loneliness.

"Looks all right to me," declared Douglas. "Not very cheerful, but I'll try it one night, anyway. Whoa!"

Eb drew the reins. The horse stopped. Douglas got out and lifted his pack. The old man sat soberly staring at the house.

"I dunno," he muttered. "I dunno. Stranger, ye better ride on a piece."

"Where to?"

"Um—I dunno. Mebbe somebody'd sleep ye. I'd do it myself, but I'm a-goin' to High Falls an' I ain't comin' back to-night."

"Thanks. I appreciate it just the same. But I reckon I'll stop here for the night. Much obliged to you, Mr. Wilham, for the ride, and more for helping me against those dogs."

"'Tain't nothin'," was the hasty disclaimer. "Them dawgs ought to been kilt long ago—I give Nat warnin' more'n once. An' don't call me Mister. I ain't used to it. 'Most everybody calls me Uncle Eb."

"All right, Uncle Eb," smiled the other.

The bright old eyes dwelt on him, and an answering smile lifted the white mustache.

"Gorry, ye look funny with them eyes all bunged up," chuckled Eb. "Snake's got a hard fist, ain't he? I wisht I could been a peewee bird up into a tree an' seen that fight. It must of been good. Wal, son, if ye can lick Snake mebbe ye can handle whatever ye see round this house. I'll stop here an' visit with ye

to-morrer, mebbe, when I come back. Shall I fetch ye some food from High Falls?"

"I wish you would. Lots of it. And some tobacco."

"Smokin' or chawin'?"

"Smoking. And for food get whatever comes handy. I'm not fussy."

He drew out a small wallet. Uncle Eb waved it aside.

"Pay me when ye git yer stuff, boy. I dunno yit what it'll cost. I'll git jest what I'd buy for myself. Then if—if ye ain't here to-morrer I can use it to home. G'by. G'yapalong!"

The hoofs hammered again into the sand. In a fresh cloud of dust the rickety wagon rolled away and was gone among the trees beyond.

Douglas shoved his wallet back into its pocket and stood a minute eyeing the little house glooming under the solemn pines. Then, reaching to his pack, he pulled from under its straps his coat. From that garment he drew two buckshot shells. Coolly he reloaded his gun.

"I reckon I'll be here to-morrow when you come back, Uncle Eb," he muttered. "Now, Mister Ha'nt, let's get acquainted."

CHAPTER VIII

THE HA'NT

SUNSET stretched its long shadows again across the Traps.

Up on the heights, the light of day still was bright and clear. But down in the bluff-bulwarked valley of the Coxing Kill, a thousand feet lower than the Minnewaska table-land behind which the sun was rolling down in the southwest, the dusk was slowly shading into dark. Already the air vibrated with the swelling chorus of the katydids, scraping out their insistent warning of frost which had not yet come; and from every grassy space cheeped the lonesome dirge of the crickets. Night was drawing on.

Down on the diminutive stoop of a little house beside the Clove road, a man stirred and glanced around him with a frown. The steadily increasing clack of the big green bush-bugs and the growing chill of eventide had routed the thoughts which he had been drawing through the stem of a blackened but empty pipe—thoughts which, to judge from his absent gaze and the half-smile on his lips, were more pleasant than those now obtruding themselves. He shook his shoulders as if to dislodge the night chill settling there. Abruptly he stood up.

His swift survey swept the little fallow field at his right, where the black choristers of the grass were

chirping away among the unseen roots; the narrow sand-track of road, empty of all but thickening shadows; the darkling mass of trees and brush at his left. Then he pivoted and peered into the darkness lying beyond a door which had been standing open at his back.

Nothing showed in the room beyond—nothing, that is, which should hold the fixed attention of a man; nothing alive. Vaguely, in the wan light still entering through the cracked panes of a curtainless side window, he could see a rickety table with one leg broken, a chair minus a back, a little rusty stove, and, in one corner, a jumble of small things recently dumped from his pack. Along a wall which started beside the open doorway showed the faint outlines of three more doors, all in a row. And that was all.

Nothing, surely, in such a scene need make this man listen keenly and half lift the shotgun in one fist. Yet he stood there for a long minute, searching the room repeatedly, then centering his gaze on the first of those three doors in the wall. That door stood open. And the queer chill between his shoulder-blades was not all due to the coolness following the sinking of the sun: it was that clammy feeling inherited by mankind through countless generations—the subconscious warning that a hidden menace lurks behind the back. And his ears subtly corroborated the caution of his nerves. Despite the clamor of the insects, he could have sworn that in the first room there at the right he had heard a slight rustle.

That room was the bedroom. It was a mere cubby-

hole, not more than seven feet square, containing only a crude bed and a lamp-shelf, both fixed. The bedstead, which the new tenant had inspected and decided to use, apparently had been built in the room by the former owner; a solid contrivance of boards and hardwood posts, with interlaced ropes serving as a spring, and a noisy mattress of corn-husks. Head, foot, and one side were snug against three of the walls, leaving only a yard-wide space between bed and door. At the foot was the one tiny window of the room.

To enter that sleeping-closet, anything must go through the door or the window. The window now stood open, for Douglas had forced up its cobwebby frame after sweeping the floor as best he could with a stubby old broom found in the grass; but that opening was within ten feet of his left hand as he sat on the steps, and nothing could possibly have gone in there without his knowledge. Still less could anything have gone past him through the door. Yet he felt in his marrow that something was there.

With slow, careful shifting of his balance he stole across the meagre stoop. Not a board creaked, not a sound did his descending soles make. With the same stealth he leaned against the door-jamb and inched his head inside. At length, braced by hands against the wall, he was leaning far in and peering through that right-hand door. In the dimness beyond stood no living thing.

Until his arm-muscles began to ache he hung there; and never a sound came to him from within. Yet his nerves continued to deliver their warning. In that

room where Jake Dalton had slept was *something;* something besides the bed and the bare lamp-shelf; invisible, intangible, but—*something!*

He drew back and glanced around once more. The dusk was drawing around the little clearing a closer cordon of gloom; an eerie whisper came from the pines, swept by a gusty wind; the throb of insects resounded as before. Nothing moved. He felt for a match. When he had it, he stepped heavily into the house and tramped over to his gas-lamp, hanging on a nail; turned its valve, shook it up, and waited for the water and carbide to mingle and form the gas. In the brief interval of waiting he watched all around and rapidly reviewed his movements since opening that window.

He had explored the place, finding at the second door a stairway leading into a dusty loft littered with dead wasps; at the third, a room even smaller than the bedroom, partly filled with stove-wood. Outside he had found a well, in which the water seemed good, and a little shed holding only a broken barrel or two, burlap bags, an empty jug, and similar trash. Both door and window had been open while he made his inspection; but he had returned to the bedroom and tossed his blankets on the mattress, and nothing new was there then. And since that time he had not been more than ten feet from it.

The fumes of gas struck his nostrils. He lit the match and touched it to the little nozzle. White and bright, the flame lit up the place. He strode into the bedroom.

Absolutely nothing new was there. With a self-derisive grin, he stooped and glanced under the bed. The floor was bare.

"Now are you satisfied, you timid old woman?" he jeered. "What's the matter with you, anyhow? Getting nerves?"

His words hollowly mocked him from the outer room. With a disgusted snort he turned away. Boots thumping defiantly, he clattered back to the three-legged table, shoved its crippled side against the wall, kicked the backless chair up to it, and set the lamp on it. To the little pile in the corner he went, and from it he extracted the dry remainder of a bread-loaf and a paper-wrapped chunk of cheese. Then he returned and sat down, hitching around in the chair to get his back toward a windowless wall.

"All the same," he meditated, sawing off a slice of bread with his jack-knife, "if I stay here long I'll have to make some improvements. For one thing, that bedroom is too darned handy. Window opens right on the road. So does the front door. No curtains on any of these windows, no key for that door. With Snake Sanders and Nat Oaks both thirsting for my gore and undoubtedly acquainted with the position of that bed—yes, I reckon I'd better move up-stairs or something. No use in lying meekly down and inviting a fistful of shot to come in and mess me up. No sense in sitting here in the light now, either."

He turned off the gas-flow, set the lamp under the table, and fell to munching his meagre provender.

"However, I'm safe enough in that room to-night,"

he told himself. "Nobody knows I'm here except Uncle Eb, who isn't coming back until to-morrow—and maybe little Miss Marion, who isn't likely to tell. There's nothing in that room but imagination, and imagination won't keep me very wide awake. Ho-hum! I'm going to sleep like a log this night."

He arose, dipped a cup of well-water from his canvas pail dangling from a nail in a low ceiling-beam, washed down his food, and reseated himself.

"Yes, sir," he informed the loneliness, carving another chunk of cheese, "this is my night to sleep. Last night I sprawled between two rocks, and the night before I lost a lot of repose watching those backwoods detectives prowl around and spy on me from the bushes down beside the creek. Things have been coming right fast in the last three days. Before that I'd never been inside that wall of cliffs over yonder. And now I've killed a catamount, assisted at the demise of three dogs, knocked one eminent citizen stiff and helped send another to sleep; made two able-bodied enemies and one potential friend—Uncle Eb—and given love's young dream a boost along the rocks to a new hide-out. Oh, yes, and assisted an escaped conv ——"

He bit off the last word, suddenly aware that he was talking aloud and recalling the ancient proverb to the effect that walls sometimes listen. Gloom now surrounded him, for the slow-dying gas flame had sunk to a little blue button on its nozzle. Rising again, he tiptoed to the door and spied around. No lurking form was near.

"Guess that will be about enough talking," he concluded.

He drew back and shut the door. Stepping across the room, he found the table, brought it over, and set it against the door so that the slightest push from outside would tip it over with a warning clatter. Then he went along the walls, tested the windows and a rear door—all of which were warped into immovability—and, carrying his gun and the chair, retired to the gloomy bedroom. There he placed gun and chair beside the bed, and on the chair he laid matches. After frowning thoughtfully at the open window he sighed and closed it.

Deliberately he undressed and rolled up in his blankets. For a minute or two he lay reveling in his freedom from clothing and the yielding embrace of the crackling but comfortable old mattress. Then the first grateful feeling of physical comfort passed. He lifted his head from the rolled-up coat forming his pillow, and turned his dilating eyes around. Over him was creeping a feeling of oppression, of inability to obtain air; and, worse yet, a panicky sensation that he was in a trap.

The blankets were snug and warm; yet that queer chill was crawling over him again. The air was fresh and clean; yet he opened his mouth as if stifled. Around him lay silence and blackness, intensified rather than relieved by the deadened chorus of insects outside and the lighter shade of the window. He turned suddenly on a side. At the loud rustle of the husks under him he jumped half erect.

A moment he poised; then he flung himself angrily back.

"You idiot!" he muttered. "You miss the stars overhead and the little night breezes around; that's all. You're in a house, and you'll have to get used to it. Go to sleep, you fool!"

He shut his eyes and forced himself to breathe regularly. But through his brain streaked the thought:

"You're in a dead man's bed! You don't know what killed him! You ——"

"Oh, shut up!" he growled aloud, bouncing over on the other side. "What's that to me? I'm going to sleep!"

For a few minutes he stubbornly held his position. But he was lying now with his back to the open door into the main room, and the creepy feeling at his shoulder-blades became intolerable. He turned again. But this time he made the movement deliberately, and at the repeated crackle of the mattress he grinned. After blinking at the dark a minute he relaxed, warm once more at the back, his eyes closing naturally.

Rapidly his fatigue asserted itself. With the muffled lullaby of the crickets swinging rhythmically on, he lost himself.

Hours passed. He slept peacefully on, changing his position a little at intervals, unconscious of his movements or of anything else. Then, all at once, he found himself up on an elbow, staring wide-eyed into the dark.

Something had moved. It seemed that the bed it-

self was quivering slightly. Yet there was no sound near him—no new sound anywhere ——

What was that? There was a sound now—but not in the room. It was up overhead—up in the empty attic; a sound of muffled footfalls, deliberately crossing the floor; a sound like that of bare heels going quietly across the boards. It traveled to and fro, as if an undressed man were wandering aimlessly. Then it began to come down-stairs.

A bump, and it stopped. Another bump; another pause. Then two soft bumps telling of a couple more stairs descended. It was the sound of a man stealing quietly down, halting to listen for any noise below; a man not deft enough to put his weight on his toes and avoid the bump of heels. Yet the stairs did not creak as they would under the weight of a man.

Very quietly, Douglas moved over and found a match. With the same stealth he opened the gas-valve of his lamp. While he waited for the acetylene flow he heard the heels reach the lowest step. He listened for the stealthy turning of the knob and the creak of door-hinges. They did not come.

Cracking the match on his thumb-nail, he lit the gas and shot its ray outward. Nothing met his gaze—nothing but the table against the outer door. Softly he lowered his feet, gripped his gun, and arose. Reason told him no man could be in that attic; but his ears positively asserted that a man had come down those stairs.

On his toes he drifted outward. In the main room he saw no living thing. Quietly he set the lamp on

the floor, its beam glaring at the stair door. With a swift grab he turned the knob and tore the door open.

Then, gun leveled, he stood and gaped.

The stairway was utterly empty.

CHAPTER IX

DALTON'S DEATH

A LONG minute dragged by while Douglas stood there, the drone of the crickets gnawing at his nerves. Then he pounced at the lamp and bounded up the stairs. At the top he halted and glared around the attic.

Nothing was there.

The tiny windows at either end, heavily coated with spider-webs, were shut as usual. Not a web was broken. Nowhere, except where one little pane had long been missing, could he see any opening into the barren room. He moved about, and the boards groaned loudly under him. They had not groaned under that ghostly unknown.

He returned down the stairs, and the steps creaked and squeaked as he passed. He slammed the door and went about the room, inspecting every door and window. All was as he had left it on retiring. He even glanced into the little wood-room. That, too, was unchanged.

"H'm!" he muttered. Pausing at the water-bag, he gulped a drink. After once more staring around, he returned to the bedroom.

Back into his tumbled blankets he got. As the strangled flame of his lamp slowly died he reached

to his trousers, dug out his watch, and glanced at it. It was now eight minutes after midnight.

"H'm!" he repeated as he lay back.

For some time after the light had expired he lay wide-eyed. No further sound came from stairs or attic. In the solid blackness he discerned nothing. At length he grinned.

"Guess I've laid you for the night, Mister Ha'nt," he whispered.

As if in answer, the bed quivered again. The feeling was as if some man standing beside him had rested a hand on the headboard—a barely perceptible tremor. He had not moved a muscle. Nor, suddenly frozen, did he move one now. He lay absolutely still, only his eyes moving.

Another quiver came. With it came a faint dry rustle. Nerves and straining ears alike flashed the same message: it was the corn-husk mattress now! The movement, the sound, were beside him, almost under him—as if a bodiless man were laying himself down to rest side by side with the live one!

With lightning speed Douglas turned and struck at the Thing. His knuckles crashed against the old cloth and its content of husks. Again he struck, this time into the air. With a dive he launched himself at the chair—clutched matches—scratched them. The yellow blaze showed that the room was empty of all life but his own.

Scrambling out, he lit fresh matches and scanned the floor under the bed. Then he wheeled and looked all about the outer room. All was as before.

The matches burned his fingers, and he dropped them. Again blackness and vacancy engulfed him. Groping, he found the bed and lay down. Then he reached out, found his gun, and laid it beside him. And this time he did not roll up in his blankets. He only draped one of them loosely over him, and kept a hand on the gun.

"Come again, Mister Ha'nt," he muttered.

Only the monotonous chorus outside answered. For a long time he lay waiting, his nerves gradually relaxing. At length, still loosely holding the weapon, he dozed away into slumber.

He awoke as if struck by a blow. A heavy thump had shocked him awake. Instantly he knew what caused it. The table against the outer door had been pushed over. The damp night air was sweeping in.

His gun leaped up. Its muzzles licked toward the entrance. One barrel vomited flame and lead.

The flare of the explosion lit up the portal. It stood ajar, but not wide enough to admit a man. Nor was any man standing there. Outside was only black, cavernous night.

His ears numbed by the concussion of the shell, he squatted there in the blankets, the other barrel ready for instantaneous use. Presently his stunned auditory nerves regained their acuteness. They told him something that brought a new chill crawling down his back. The song of the insects no longer swung through the night. And out there on the steps sounded a dull, slow *drip—drip—drip.*

With measured beat that dread sound hammered at

his brain. It slowed, as if the first flow of falling fluid were becoming choked—or clotted. Then it ceased.

Shuddering, he moved once more to the edge, groped about until he found his boots, and slipped his legs into them. Feeling again through the dark, he located his matches. But he did not light one. With half a dozen of the little light-sticks in his hand, he stepped stealthily to the front door.

Long he listened, hearing nothing but a weird whisper of night wind among leaves. The air was clammy, and in it was a wet smell. He began to shiver again; but this time the cold was natural—the dank cold of dampness. Feeling about, he found a leg of the overturned table. On it he scratched a match, and out into the uncanny gloom beyond the door he darted the burning sliver.

The stoop was empty. The thing he had dreaded to find slumped against the wall was not there. Nor were the old boards disfigured by any fresh red stain.

Sorely perplexed, he ignited a new match from the expiring stub. As he did so a new thought struck his mind. Perhaps the dead thing was in the room, huddled beside him. He yanked the match inward—and found nothing but the capsized table, its legs wedging the door.

As the light died down a sudden soft sound made him jump. It was a single drop falling on the steps outside.

With a new match flaring he yanked the door open and strode out, angrily determined to find the source

of those soul-sickening drops. He had not far to go. After one straight look at the steps he flung down the match and laughed out in savage scorn of himself.

The narrow steps were wet, but with nothing more sinister than rain. The dampness of the air, the utter blackness around, the silence of the insects—all told of a recent shower. Even now the crickets were beginning to chirp again. Somehow their sturdy notes, which previously had seemed doleful, now sounded cheerful.

"You doddering imbecile!" he jeered. "It's as simple as daylight. A little shower just before you woke up—a gust of wind shoving the door open—the drip of the eaves for a minute or so. And you, you hysterical half-wit—you shoot a harmless door and turn into a knot of goose-flesh because of that! Who ever told you you were a grown-up man? You're nothing but a scared-of-the-dark baby!"

He drank in a deep breath of the sweet air and nodded unseen encouragement to some lusty cricket in the grass near the stoop. But, as he turned again toward the door, he hesitated. Wind and rain could not be blamed for the footsteps on the stairs or the sounds and movements of his bed. Something urged him to take his blankets and lie down outdoors, even though the ground was wet: to sleep surrounded by the honest-voiced crickets, unconfined by walls within which stalked bodiless things.

"No!" he growled. "Back to bed you go, and there you stay. This is a fight to a finish, Mister Ha'nt, and I've taken one round out of three, with

the other two drawn. I think I've got you on the run. Now let's see if you can come back."

With that he felt his way in, shut the door, kicked the table negligently against it, and returned to bed.

As he rearranged his blankets, heavy drops thudded overhead. Rapidly the spattering impacts swelled into a drumming roar of new rain.

"Aha," he nodded. "You'd look sweet out in the grass now, wouldn't you? By the time you got back in here you'd be well soaked, and it would serve you right. The Lord hates a quitter. Come on, Ha'nt. I'm waiting."

He continued to wait. Steadily the rain pounded on, varied only by slashing swoops at the window. His eyes closed. His breathing slowed. The tumult of the storm faded out of his consciousness.

By and by he found himself drifting over a murky waste of waters which swashed and hissed and gurgled in sullen enmity. Above was no sun or moon or star—nothing but a dreary void. Around was no life; he was utterly alone in the desolation of plunging waves, a derelict at the mercy of wind and tide. But presently weird shapes took form among the billows—ghastly, gigantic wraiths which mouthed hideous grimaces down at him and reached for him with shadowy fingers. They veered away before they touched him, and a great wind blew them apart into fragments of mist and spume. But they formed again, making more frightful spectres than before, and stalked athwart the waste, half seen through a roaring deluge of rain. They began to yell his name, and with the shouts

blended a thunder of hollow blows. He tried to yell back at them ——

He was in his bed again. Wan daylight was in his opening eyes. The noise of falling rain was real. So were the loud knocking and the calling of his name. The pounding came from the outer door, and the voice was that of Uncle Eb.

"Hey, Hampton! Hampton! Speak up if ye're livin'!"

He jumped from bed, shoved the table away from the entrance, and pulled the door open. Uncle Eb, his mustache drooping in a bedraggled wisp and his body gleaming dully in a wet rubber coat, took a sudden backward step.

"Gorry, boy! Ye scairt me, a-snakin' the door open so sudden. I was about gittin' ready to go 'long. How be ye?"

"All right, thanks. Come in. Wet morning."

"Mornin'? It's 'most noon, son. Ye been sleepin' all this time? Mebbe—mebbe ye was broke of yer rest, though. That it?"

"That's it. You were right—there are some funny things around this place."

The old man nodded quickly, and his eyes swerved to the door. Following his gaze, Douglas saw that the panels were furrowed across by shot, and in the casing beyond was a splintery hole.

"I ain't a mite s'prised," was the guarded admission. "But git yer pants on an' don't stand here with yer shirt-tail a-flappin'. I got some tobacker an' so on into the wagon—whoa, Bob! a little more rain won't

hurt ye after what ye come through—I'll git it right out. Snake on yer clo'es before ye git cold."

Yawning, Douglas snaked them on. By the time he emerged from his bedroom Uncle Eb had returned with a bulky box which seemed almost dry. Without ceremony he tramped in and dropped the box with a thud.

"Thar she is, right side up with care an' dry as Nigger Nat—been ridin' under a rubber blankit all the way. Gorry, ain't this a rain! It's the line storm. What say? Oh, four dollars an' thutty-five cents. Thank ye."

"Don't thank me. Peel off your coat and light your pipe while I get breakfast—or luncheon, or whatever you want to call it. Why do you say 'dry as Nigger Nat'?"

"Wal——" Uncle Eb hesitated, looking toward the stove. "No, I can't stop. I got to git 'long, or the folks'll think somebody waylaid me—I'd oughter be to home now. Nat? Oh, that's jest a sayin' we've got round here—'dry as Nigger Nat.' He's one o' them misfortunit critters that can't never drownd his thirst, if ye know what I mean. He warn't round to visit with ye last night, was he?" He turned toward the shot-scored door.

"Not to my knowledge. Sit down a minute, and I'll tell you about my visitors. Yes, I had some."

Duty and curiosity struggled a few seconds in Uncle Eb. Curiosity, of course, won. He accepted the chair and some new tobacco, loaded a disreputable old pipe, puffed as Douglas held a blazing match for him, and

looked expectant. Douglas, his own pipe aglow, forthwith enlightened him as to the happenings of the night. He made merry over his various scares; but the older man, his eyes soberly traveling from door to door, did not echo his mirth.

"By mighty, boy, I take off my hat to ye," he barked. "I ain't scairt o' nothin' that walks or crawls or swims or flies, an' I ain't soop'stitious nuther, but I don't want to live into no house where things walks without no feet an' jiggles a bed without no hands. No sirree! I guess mebbe 'twas the wind that blowed yer door open—must of been. But them other things ——"

He shook his head and spat noisily on the floor.

"I want to tell ye sumpthin'," he went on. "I thought I wouldn't tell ye yesterday, so's ye wouldn't git scairt beforehand; but after I went 'long I wished I had, so's ye'd be ready. I been worried ever sence. Thinks I, if anything comes to ye into the night an' catches ye asleep it'll be my fault for not tellin' ye.

"Wal, now, this house was Jake Dalton's. He warn't a sociable critter, lived all by hisself, kind o' growled if ye spoke to him; an' he used to go 'way for days to a time—had sumpthin' to do up back, mebbe—I never ast no questions. But I drive up an' down 'tween here an' High Falls pretty reg'lar—I git my mail thar an' so on—an' I know how everything looks 'long the way. An' Jake's door was always shut, whether he was to home or not—'less'n he jest happened to be comin' out when I went by.

"But one day I see this door a-standin' a little ways

open an' Jake nowheres round. I didn't say nothin'—I went 'long an' come back, an' 'twas jest the same. I kind o' figgered about it, but then I thought mebbe Jake was drinkin' up a new jug inside here an' didn't know 'nough to shut his door—he used to git that way. So I went 'long. But about three-four days later on somebody said Jake's door was open yit, an'—wal, some of us come down here to see what was what.

"Jake was out back. He was the deadest man I ever see. He'd been thar—I dunno how long, but too long anyway. I ain't a-goin' to tell ye how he looked—I don't want to remember it too plain. But we couldn't see a mark onto him, an' we dunno yit what kilt him. But he got kilt sometime into the night.

"We know that much, 'cause Jake was undressed—nothin' onto him but his shirt—an' we found the rest o' his clo'es hangin' on nails beside the bed, an' his shoes layin' onto the floor jest where he dropped 'em. He had got up an' tore open this front door an' run out back an' fell down an' died. He was dyin' when he run out o' here, too—he only went a little ways. But what he was runnin' away from—what had got holt o' him before he run—nobody knows. Nobody but Jake, an' he can't tell.

"That's all there is to it, 'cept this: two-three fellers tried livin' here an' they couldn't. They heard them same things that was round ye last night, an' other things too, 'cordin' to what I've heard tell; an' they *felt* sumpthin' that was worse'n what they heard. They jest couldn't stand it. So they took everything wuth carryin' an' got out, an' sence then nobody's been

here but Dalton's Death—that's what folks calls the thing that walks here nights: Dalton's Death. I dunno if —— Whoa thar, Bob, *whoa!* Back up!"

He clattered to the door and plunged out. Douglas followed, to find him grabbing the reins and halting the white horse.

"Got to go 'long, boy," he shouted from the edge of the road. "Bob's a-gittin' cranky, an' mebbe he's got a right to. 'Tain't fitten weather for hoss or man. Come on up an' visit with me any time."

He clambered in and turned to yell an afterthought.

"Don't leave yer gun here when ye go out. Ye might lose it. Some folks ain't scairt o' Dalton's Death 'ceptin' at night. G'by. G'yapalong!"

Blurred by the rain, he rolled away and was gone.

CHAPTER X

A SCRAP OF PAPER

SINGING a sleepy little song, the waters of Coxing Kill flowed lazily down their stony channel into a deep green pool.

A week ago, swollen by the deluge of the equinox, the Kill had ramped and roared through this glen, overwhelming both the shallows and the depths in brawling, swirling flood. But now the tumult and violence were past, the raw chill had fled from the air, and under the soft sun of new October the pool had again become its serene self: rimmed by vertical gray-white rock, shadowed by shaggy hemlocks, reflecting on its placid bosom the snowy clouds floating across the high blue above—an exquisite little gem of sylvan beauty which would have held an artist enthralled. Yet it knew few visitors except the birds and the squirrels, whose practical eyes saw nothing of its charm; for it was well away from the Clove road, and few of the denizens of the Traps ever wasted their time seeking scenery.

To-day, however, the little nook was not empty of human life. At the upper end of the small chasm a figure sat against the base of one of the hemlocks, its bare feet tucked under the hem of a faded dress, its tumbled hair glowing red in the sunlight filtering

down through the eastern tree-tangle. The little birds and the wood-mice, moving about in their unceasing search for food, paused at times to cock their round eyes at that unwonted gleam of red against the bark. But soon they resumed their activities, unafraid; for, though they could not understand what the girl sitting so quietly there was doing, they felt that she was a friend.

On her updrawn knees rested a slanting piece of thin board, and on the board a scrap of paper. Her pensive gray eyes studied the short vista down-stream, and from time to time she moved a stubby pencil lightly along the sheet, transferring to it new lines. Then, with a frown, she would wet a finger-tip at her mouth and rub out a line or two.

It seemed to be an absorbing task, this marking and erasing and studying, upon which she was concentrating her whole soul. Yet it was not so engrossing as to rob her of the senses which she possessed in common with the tiny wild things around her. All at once she and a king-bird which had silently settled near by and a mouse under a bush and a chipmunk on a bowlder-top did exactly the same thing—froze in the intuitive immobility of the wilderness, looking northward. A few yards beyond, a stick had cracked dully under foot.

Among the tree-trunks a moving form presently became visible, advancing with no particular stealth but with the quiet step of a man acquainted with woods travel. The king-bird launched himself on soundless wings and was gone. The mouse faded into a hole.

The chipmunk whisked about on his tail and poised for a lightning jump. The girl made no movement whatever.

The man swung nonchalantly along the brink of the rock rim, plumbing with casual gaze the clear water below. Then he halted, his lifting gaze caught and held by the red glint under the hemlock. A smile lit up his lightly bronzed face.

"Howdy, Miss Marion," he bowed. "Are you 'waylaying' me?"

"If I was, you'd be all shot 'fore now," she retorted. "I could 'most stick a gun right into your mouth from here. Are you near-sighted or somethin'?"

"Blind as a bat, I reckon. I can't see a thing beyond you, so I'm going to stop and visit until my sight clears up."

She flushed and sat up straighter.

"Are you makin' fun of my hair?" she demanded.

"Why, no. Certainly not. What made you think that?"

"Oh, everybody does. They say Nigger Nat don't need a lamp with my red head there into the house, and anybody that meets me onto the road says he thought 'twas a forest-fire comin', and—oh, I'm sick of it! I thought mebbe you wanted to be funny the same way when you said you couldn't see past me."

"No, no. It was a poor joke, but I didn't mean it that way." He dropped beside her, laying his gun beside his right leg. "Don't let folks bother you. Chances are that they'd give anything to have hair like

yours—the women, anyway—but because they can't have it they make fun of it. It's the way of the world. What's this?"

His hand lifted the forgotten paper and board from her lap. She snatched at it.

"Gimme that!"

"Not yet." He jerked it aside and held it out of reach. "Why, it's a sketch! Let's see—here's the creek, and ——"

She threw herself at him, her cheeks burning, her hands struggling to seize the paper.

"You gimme that!" she blazed. "'Tain't no good—don't you look at it!"

But he laughed and stretched his long right arm to its longest, holding the paper a yard from her.

"Now don't get excited. I won't hurt it. I like to look at pictures ——"

She tore at his left arm, which blocked her like a steel bar.

"You—you—gimme that—paper!" she panted. "If you don't I'll—I'll scratch!"

He shot a shrewd glance at her furious face and at the slender, long-nailed fingers now poising in curving menace. The restraining arm gave way suddenly—so suddenly that she pitched forward. In one flashing instant that arm had looped around her and pinned her against him, her own arms blocked by his body.

"You little wildcat, I believe you would," he nodded. "But I really haven't finished looking at the picture. So behave yourself. Now let's see—there's a

hemlock—good, too! And the rock edge along—no, that's not so good. But still, I can easily see what it's meant for, and —— Behave, I say!"

Writhing, wrenching, heaving, she was fighting like a mad thing to break his hold and free her hands. His arm only crushed her tighter. Tears of helpless anger welled into her eyes. All at once her head dropped on his shoulder.

"There, don't cry." He loosened his hold. "I'll give it right —— Ouch!"

Instead of weeping on his shoulder she was biting it. He dropped the board and lurched upward, drawing her with him. She lifted her head and laughed out wildly.

"Guess you'll let me go now, won't you?" she taunted.

His jaw set. His right arm, too, swept around her, holding her loosely, yet close.

"Think so?" he challenged. "Go on and bite! Bite hard!"

The blazing gray eyes burned up into the steely blue ones. Breast to breast, body to body, they stood, their eyes welded together. She made to move her head, but the motion died. Still their eyes clung. And then something happened.

How, why, what it was neither knew—perhaps a subtle opening of some hitherto unknown chamber of the heart. But the fire died from the gray eyes, the chill melted from the blue ones; and something else crept into their unswerving gaze. For unmeasured minutes the man and the girl stood in silence.

Then his arms slowly loosened. Swaying a little, she stepped away.

"I—you—nobody never hugged me like that before," she whispered, as if unconscious of her words. "I'm—I'm dizzy, seems like."

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"I ain't," she breathed. Wide-eyed, she stared up as if seeing a man for the first time in her life: as if some fairy wand had swept from before her a veil through which she had regarded men as creatures little more interesting than any other common animals. "Why—why are *you* sorry?"

He made no answer. His gaze dropped and rested absently on the pencil-lined paper which had brought it all about.

"Why did you—let me go?" she asked.

"I was thinking of—Steve," was his slow reply.

Her face clouded. Her head drooped, and her fingers intertwined.

"Steve," she repeated. "I see. I—I was forgittin' about Steve."

She sank down and sat with her chin in her hands, soberly contemplating the passing water. He bent, picked up the paper, and forced his mind to concentrate on it. After a studious interval he nodded and looked thoughtfully at the tapering fingers which so recently had threatened his face.

"Er—ahem! Do you know, Miss Marion, that you have the rudiments of art? I'm no artist myself, but I know a little about it. How did you ever come

to draw like this? And why didn't you want me to see it?"

She looked up, but in a detached way. Then her eyes returned to the creek.

"'Most everybody makes fun of my pictures," she said, as if only part of her mind were talking. "I dunno what you mean by rood—roody—what you said about art. But I like to draw; it comes natural. I git spells when I jest *have* to draw things. That's what got me throwed out of school. I'd draw pictures and teacher would catch me and tear 'em up—and one day I 'most tore him up too: I flew and scratched his face, and I got put out, and that was the end of my schoolin'. I don't care. I don't want to go to school and work onto figgers and have 'em make fun of me 'cause my hair's red and my pop's a nigger and all. I'd ruther go off by my own self and make pictures into the woods and rocks.

"There was an artist feller in here two-three years back—they come round sometimes—and I watched how he worked and tried to do like it, and when he see what I was up to he laughed and laughed and—I can't stand to be laughed at! I thought you'd laugh too, soon as you see what I made onto that paper."

He said nothing for a time. He pondered on her work, studied her again, and sighed.

"Too bad," he thought. "She has real ability, if it could be developed. And to think that she's the offspring of such animals as 'them Oakses'!"

Marion spoke again.

"Down in the city do men say 'Miss Marryin,' like

you do? I thought 'twas jest 'Miss Oaks,' or 'Marry.'"

"It all depends. If you don't know her well, or if you don't want to, you say 'Miss Oaks.' If you're pretty well acquainted, so that you feel sort of friendly, it's 'Miss Marion.' You have to be real good friends to drop the 'Miss' part of it. Unless, of course, she's only a little girl."

"I see. I dunno if I like 'Miss Marryin,' but mebbe I do, too. It's—it's kind of respectful, ain't it? Nobody never spoke respectful to me in my life. It makes me feel kind of growed-up. But I notice you keep on sayin' 'Miss Marryin' even after you—after you hugged me jest now. And that's only sort of friendly, you say."

He opened his mouth to answer, but closed it again. He did not know just what to say. He felt, too, that no answer was needed—that she was musing aloud rather than talking to him. A long pause followed. Then she spoke, not of herself, but of him.

"I hear you're livin' right 'long into Jake's house. Ain't the ha'nt there now?"

"Oh, yes. He's there. But I'm used to him now. He never does anything but tramp around and shake the bed once in awhile, and I sleep pretty well. How's Steve? And your pop?"

"Steve—he's all right. He's into a good place, and I see him every day. Pop's same as usual—drunk most of the time. But you want to watch out if he gits sober. He's p'ison mad at you, 'count of the dogs. I'm awful glad you kilt them critters. They

were always ugly and I was scairt of 'em. One of 'em bit you, didn't he?"

"Not to amount to anything—nipped my side a little, but the worst damage was to my shirt."

She nodded, and went on.

"Pop keeps a-stewin' 'bout it. And Snake Sanders is out now, too. Snake, he was all lamed up awhile, 'specially his neck—couldn't hardly move it for more'n a week. He says he fell down into the rocks."

She paused. He said nothing. Then she added: "But some folks say he got licked by a detective."

With that she faced about, her eyes twinkling now. At sight of his wide grin she laughed out.

"Folks sometimes tell the truth," he admitted. "But what about Snake and your pop?"

"Well——" She hesitated. "Snake's got some kind of a hold onto pop, and they've been together a lot lately, and pop seems to be soberin' up some. That sometimes means trouble for somebody. I dunno what's up—I keep out of the way when Snake comes to the house, 'cause I don't want him pesterin' round me. But you better be careful."

"H'm! Pestering around you? How?"

"Oh, he wants me to go and live with him. And he's got a woman already—Lou Brackett. She's been his woman 'most a year. But I ain't a-goin'. Pop, he'd try to make me go, but mom won't let him. She hates Snake 'most as bad as I do."

Douglas gave a soundless whistle. Her matter-of-fact statement jolted him. Then his face hardened.

"Is he at your house now?" he demanded. "I

didn't come along the road—rambled along the creek—so I didn't go past there."

"What you want to know for?" She swiftly arose. "You keep away from Nigger Nat's!"

For answer, he picked up his gun and turned toward the road. She sprang at him, grasping his arm.

"What you goin' to do? Tell me!"

"Teach that snake to keep away from your place."

"No! Listen to me. That's jest what they'd like. You go trompin' into there with a gun and makin' a row, and you'd git it—into the back! You keep out. Let 'em come to you if they want, but you keep out of Nigger Nat's. You'll only make it worse for me if you go there—me and Steve too."

The last words stopped him. Frowning, he rubbed his chin and considered.

"Nobody knows I know you—I ain't told," she went on. "Mebbe I might want a friend all to once, and so might Steve. A friend that nobody knowed about might be worth a lot. And till then, I'd git 'long a lot easier if pop and Snake didn't s'picion things."

Slowly he nodded. Again their eyes met and held, and the frank pleading in the gray ones softened the chilled-steel glimmer of the blue.

"All right, Marion. I'll mind—this time. But only if you promise to come to me any time you need help."

The tapering fingers gave his arm a quick pressure. Then she stood back.

"I promise you. Now you better go 'long—I've got

to go home pretty quick, and I'll have to go by my own self. Go on up the crick, as if I wasn't here."

He nodded and turned away. But he turned back.

"Keep right on doing that," he urged, pointing at the sketch on the ground. "It's worth while. You're doing fine."

With that he trudged away. The bushes quietly closed behind him. The little mouse came out, the chipmunk whisked in a yellow streak from somewhere back to his bowlder, the creek sang placidly on. Still the girl stood looking at the spot where the man had disappeared.

"He minded me!" she murmured, a soft glow coming and going in her cheeks. "He minded me—and I bet he'd sooner fight than eat. And he said 'Marryin,' too, not 'Miss.' But—but Steve ——"

All at once she leaned against the hemlock tree. And the mouse and the chipmunk stood still and stared about, seeking a sound which blended into the gurgle of the creek but was not of it; a new, sad sound which they never had heard before. It was the sobbing of a girl.

CHAPTER XI

AT THE BRIDGE

At the edge of the water, beside a little bridge spanning the Kill, Douglas sat on a stone and leisurely chewed at a sandwich. It was an hour since he had bidden Marion good-bye and resumed his wandering way up the stream; and now, though noon was not quite at hand, he felt that this was the time and the place to eat. The flat-topped stone was a comfortable seat, the sun poured its welcome warmth around him, the pure water flowing past furnished both drink and finger-bath, and somewhere among the leaves a phœbe-bird sang to him its sweetly simple little plaint.

So, healthily hungry and pleasantly tired by his morning ramble to this point, he basked and ruminated as if it made no difference whether he continued his upward course along the brook or stayed where he was until dark. For that matter, it made none. He was his own man and master, free to come or go or start or stop as fancy decided; and if he should change his careless purpose of the morning—to follow the stream upward to its birthplace in high Lake Minnewaska—no consequences would follow. What he did not do to-day he could do to-morrow, or leave forever undone. It mattered not, so long as one more care-free day was added to his life.

He knew, of course, that soon these golden days must end. Just as the gray chill of November and the ensuing cold of winter would presently terminate this dreamy season of the harvest-time, so the necessity of doing his share of the work of the world must eventually drive him forth from the Traps and back to the hurly-burly of the towns. But the bleak time of the snows still was weeks away; and so, he hoped, was the day when he must desert this wild corner of the hills. Meanwhile, like the squirrels which roved about in search of supplies to tide them through the bitter time approaching, he rambled and gathered into the storehouse of Memory many a mind-picture to feed his nature-loving soul when he should again be walled within the clanking city.

Every day since the ending of the "line storm" he had traveled the Traps. Time and again he had spent an entire day threading his way over, under, and around the myriad bowlders lying at the foot of Dickie Barre's precipice: some towering on end to the height of their parent rock itself, bearing mute witness to the terrific power of the ice of the glacial age, hiding among them masked chasms seldom seen by human eyes; some leaning together as if placed by the hands of some Indian giant whimsically building a rock wigwam; and countless blocks of every size and shape, overlying one another at every angle, as if battered from the face of the butte by the hammer of a mad Thor.

In the long cliff itself he had found gloomy caverns and crevices which he did not enter, but which, he

suspected, were by no means unknown to certain men of the Traps. The days were too short and his progress through the chaos too slow and arduous to devote time to an extended exploration of those holes. So he had viewed their exteriors with a shrewd smile and passed on. And, though no sound from within those gloomy portals ever floated to him, perhaps it was as well that he did pass on.

But he had not spent all his time in that labyrinth, nor had he passed southward in it beyond the point where his "catamount girl" had first cried to him in the night for help. Then she had been coming toward him from the south, and he felt that in that direction was her little secret dream-cave, and that not far from it the fugitive Steve now was hiding. Her secret should remain her own; he did not wish even to blunder into it by chance. Instead, he turned his errant steps in other directions.

Down the Clove road he had gone, visiting the Clove itself—a flat-bottomed valley through which the Kill meandered, and where old stone houses hinted at the Indian days when every settler's home must be his fortress. Along the way, and in the Clove, he had met men who stared with unmasked interest, answered slowly and briefly when addressed, showed neither friendliness nor hostility, but seemed relieved when he moved on. Only one had asked him a question, and that query was direct and personal.

"Ye're Hammerless Hampton, ain't ye?"

"My name's Hampton," he had answered. "Why the Hammerless?"

A slow nod toward his hammerless gun had revealed the reason for his new name. When he in turn began asking questions the man had moved away.

Now, ending his meal and dipping up a measure of water in his tin cup, Hammerless Hampton smiled at the memory.

"I'm getting to be a sort of desperado," he mused. "That nickname sounds like Bowie Bill, or Derringer Dick, or Six-gun Sam—h'm! or like Snake Sanders. Hope the citizenry hereabouts doesn't classify me along with that reptile. I let him think, before I punched him, that I was dodging the law, and maybe he's spread the idea around. I'd give a big shiny quarter to know just what I'm supposed to be. I know I'm a goat, but am I a black one or a white one or a spotted one?"

Downing the drink, he refilled his cup and set it beside him on the stone while he loaded his pipe. Then he looked at his watch.

"Guess I'll move in a few minutes," he decided. "I believe the schoolhouse is up yonder at the corner, and the youngsters will be out soon and chasing down here, maybe. But I've time for a smoke first."

He glanced along up-stream, under the bridge, as he lit his pipe. Up that way led an unkempt road debouching from the sandy track leading across the bridge, and he decided to follow it part of the way. Then his eyes lifted, and as they rested on the railing above him they widened.

Leaning on that rail, watching him, stood a woman.

He had not heard her approach, but she was there,

and seemed to have been there several minutes. She was slatternly, frowsy-haired, olive-skinned, with Indian cheek-bones and black eyes; garbed in a shapeless, faded dress, and barefoot. Yet she was quite young and not without a sensuous comeliness. Now, meeting his surprised gaze, she slowly smiled as if she had found her survey of him rather pleasing.

"Howdy," he said coolly. "Where did you spring from?"

Her smile widened, revealing the fact that two of her front teeth had been knocked out.

"Kind o' caught ye nappin', hey?" she drawled. "Was ye waitin' for somebody?"

He puffed a couple of times before replying, meanwhile observing that her gaze went a little beyond him to the gun-barrels glistening in the sun.

"Nope. If I were, I wouldn't be sitting here in plain sight."

She nodded with a bovine air of wisdom.

"Tha's right," she agreed. "But what ye lookin' for? Ther' ain't nawthin' along o' here."

"Well, now, let's see. If I'm looking for anything, it's for the place where this brook starts."

She regarded him with increasing amusement. Then she laughed outright, her sleek shoulders quivering as she rocked on her dusty toes.

"I guess so. Yas, I guess so! A lot o' good that'd do ye, wouldn't it now? Ha ha! Be ye findin' any cold tea up into the rawcks, mister?"

"Up in the rocks? What makes you think I've been up there?"

She looked up the road; down the road; at the bushy track leading away behind her, up-stream. Reassured, she laughed down at him.

"Oh, I hearn 'bout ye," she declared. "Some o' them rawcks has got eyes into 'em, mister. Ye've been up ther' a-noseyin' all around. Was ye lookin' ther' for the place wher' this crick starts?"

Again she shook with laughter. Coupled with the oddity of the missing teeth, her mirth was contagious. Douglas grinned in answer.

"Nope. Hunting a gold-mine. What did you think?"

To his surprise, she took the jest seriously. Her black brows lifted and her wide smile faded. Presently she nodded in that wise way of hers.

"Ninety-Nine's Mine!" she said. "But 'tain't a gold-mine, mister—it's silver. An' it's fu'ther down than the place wher' ye been lookin'—leastways that's what folks say. But ye'll be a long time a-huntin', I shouldn't wonder. Why didn't ye say so before, 'stead o' gittin' folks all riled up 'cause they didn't know what ye was pesterin' round after?"

He stared, wondering whether she was making game of him, and decided that she was not. A lost mine! His blood quickened at the thought. But he kept control of his face and smiled again casually.

"You're the first one to ask me what I was doing," he told her. "The rest of them decided I was a detective without asking me, so I let them think what they liked."

"Ye're simple!" she scoffed. "If folks knowed ye

was a-huntin' the mine they'd jest laff an' let ye go it, but seein' ye a-slidin' round so quiet an' not knowin'—wal, ye can't blame folks for s'picionin' things. An' all to once ye might fall into trouble so hard ye'd never git outen it."

"Maybe you're right. But aren't you wrong about the silver? I thought it was gold."

She swallowed the bait whole.

"Nah! Silver, I tell ye. I'd oughter know—I lived into this place all my life, an' I hearn the story many's the time.

"Ol' Ninety-Nine—everybody's forgot what his real name was, 'twas so long ago—he worked the mine all by hisself an' wouldn't let nobody else know wher' 'twas. Bimeby he turned up missin', an' he never come back. But a long time afterward one o' the Injuns round here come to 'Lias Fox an' ast him to help him onto somethin' he couldn't do alone. 'Lias he was pretty old, but he was strong an' willin', an' him an' this Injun went up into the woods down yender, toward the ledges. An' when they got up into the rawcks the Injun blindfolded him 'fore he'd go any fu'ther 'long."

She paused suddenly and again looked up and down the road.

"An' then he took 'Lias a-stubblin' round into them rawcks," she resumed, "an' pretty quick 'Lias lost track o' wher' he was. But bimeby the Injun took the hankercher offen his eyes, an' he was a-standin' beside a big flat rawck like a trap-door, with another rawck a-stickin' up beside of it like a marker. Then the

Injun got a good stout pry, an' they got one end under the flat rawck an' bore down, an' the two of 'em hefted up that rawck an' wedged it. An' under it was a hole with some rawck steps a-runnin' down an' into the ledge.

"The Injun he went down into the hole, but he made 'Lias stay out an' see the pry didn't slip. Pretty quick he come up an' tied 'Lias's eyes ag'in, an' 'Lias had to let him 'cause he was old an' the Injun looked pretty bad. Then the Injun walked him out a ways an' left him an' went back, an' 'Lias hearn the rawck go *bang* down wher' 'twas before, an' then the Injun come back, an' they went 'long out, with the Injun ahead.

"'Lias, he got so curious he nigh busted, an' he slipped the cloth up an' peeked. An' the Injun was a-carryin' two big heavy bars o' silver. 'Lias, he knowed then he'd been to Ninety-Nine's Mine. But he didn't dast say nawthin', an' he pulled down the hankercher an' never let on. Bimeby the Injun stopped an' took off the cloth, an' they was out o' the rawcks an' the Injun didn't have no silver—he'd laid it down somewheres. He told 'Lias to go home an' keep his mouth shet, an' he'd come back sometime an' show 'Lias somethin' that'd make him rich. An' then he went back into the rawcks an' 'Lias went home.

"'Lias, he waited years an' years, but the Injun never come back. 'Lias got too old to go huntin' that place, but he told his boy Tom 'bout it 'fore he died, an' Tom he hunted till he died, but he never did git to it. An' Tom's boys, Will an' Abner, they hunted too

—till Will got kilt. A piece o' rawck fell offen the ledge an' mashed him all up. Then Abner, he got scairt an' never looked no more—he says old Ninety-Nine's cuss is onto the place an' no white man will ever git that silver. Sence then 'most every man into the Traps has looked, but nobody found it."

Her drawl was gone and her tongue flying fast in the joy of retelling a well-worn tale. Now she suddenly moved off the bridge and came slipping down the slope toward him. He arose.

"But ther's somethin' that everybody don't know," she added mysteriously. "An' that's this—the place wher' the sun hits the wall fust into the mornin', that's wher' Ninety-Nine's Mine is! Mebbe ye can find it, mister—don't tell nobody—but if ye find it 'member I told ye. Will ye gimme some o' the silver if ye find it? I—I wanter git outen this place!"

In the black eyes upturned to his were appeal, revolt, wistfulness—and, as they continued to look at him, something else. Unabashed, unmistakable, they gave him the message that she found him very good to look on; that he had but to reach for her and take her. He stepped back a little.

"I'll do that—if I find it," he assured her, repressing a smile. "If ever I stumble into Ninety-Nine's Mine I'll give you a full share of whatever is in it. Now I think I'll move ——"

He paused. She had started and thrown a scared glance behind. From up on the hill sounded shouts and the thud of running feet. School was out.

"Oh, my Gawd—git in under the bridge quick!"

she gasped. "I dasn't be seen with ye—quick—let 'em git by!"

She tugged at his arm, then jumped for cover under the bridge. He hesitated, scorning to hide. But she beckoned imploringly.

"Ye'll git me into misery!" she quavered. "Don't let 'em see ye—they'll stop an' ——"

He yielded to her importunity. Seizing his gun, he bounded under the planks.

The spatting feet and the childish voices rocketed down upon them. The boards thumped roaringly, and into the little tunnel drizzled sand from the cracks. They were passing by ——

Then a boy's voice shouted:

"Lookit! There's a tin cup!"

Douglas glowered at the forgotten cup gleaming on the stone outside. He started to move toward it, intending to drive or lure the children away without letting them peer under the bridge and find the woman. But he was too late.

Down the slope ran two skinny children, boy and girl, to grab the prize. Their quick eyes darted under the bridge. They stopped, and, for a second, stood open-mouthed. Then across their faces shot a cunning look. Upward they jumped again at top speed, and into the road their twinkling legs vanished. And out pealed their voices in malicious glee, screaming at the other youngsters:

"Hey! Oo-ee! Lookit! That 'ere 'tective feller has got Snake Sanders's woman under the bridge!"

CHAPTER XII

THE LAW COMES

DOUGLAS stopped, wheeled, stared at the woman. In her face now burned dull anger.

"Ther' now, ye went an' done it," she droned. "Wha'd ye go an' leave that cup ther' for? Ye fool!"

"Are you ——" He hesitated. "Is that true—what they're saying?"

"Oh, yas, it's true 'nough. I'm Lou Brackett," she admitted sullenly. "An' jest 'cause I stop to say 'howdy' ye go an' git me into this! I'm in for it now. Cuss the luck!"

"You mean Snake will ——"

"Ah, he wunt kill me—I'm too handy. He'll only haff kill me. But ther'"—a spark of spirit began to gleam under the black brows—"I can git the jump onto him, knowin' what's a-comin'. I'll keep the sad-iron by me, an' when he comes I'll ——"

She paused abruptly, a new and shrewd look flitting over her face. All at once she smiled wide and rolled her eyes at him.

"I know what we can do," she gurgled. "Don't ye want a good housekeeper, mister? I hearn ye live all by yerself, an' that ain't no way for no man to live. I can cook an' sew an' take good care o' ye, an'—wal, ye got me into this; now ye'd oughter look out for me."

So taken aback was he that he stood wordless. She moved toward him. He stepped away. A lucky thought came to him.

"I'm living with Dalton's Death," he solemnly stated. "You couldn't live there. The ha'nt walks every night, knocking on the walls and ——"

"Don't say no more!" she quavered. "I was forgittin'. Ye're crazy, livin' into that house! I'd ruther stay to Snake's."

Inwardly congratulating himself, he sought a line of escape for her—and found it. Up-stream the bank was thickly bushed for some distance, and, though the voices of the children were not far off, they sounded at a respectable distance. He pointed.

"Go up there," he directed tersely. "Get well away and then hide in the brush. I'll go talk to the kids—tell them they're cross-eyed. Oh, and listen—if Snake acts mean ask him what he's hanging around Nat Oaks' so much for. If you jump on him quick enough maybe he'll forget what he hears about this."

A vindictive glint crept into her eyes.

"So he's a-pesterin' 'round ther', hey? I'll fix him! I'll ——"

"Get going!"

With that he stepped out and strode up the bank. As he expected, the children were grouped several yards away, eager to spy but afraid to venture too near the lurking "detective." At sight of him they retreated, ready to flee at the slightest threatening movement. He made none. He had a better plan.

"Well, what are you young folks jabbering about?"

he chaffed them. "Can't a fellow take a smoke under a bridge without your getting all excited about it?"

They dug their toes into the dust, warily watching him. He took a lazy stride, and they gave back instantly—though they did not run. Pausing, he ostentatiously puffed at the pipe still smouldering between his teeth. The ensuing blue haze bore out his claim that he had been smoking.

"What's this I heard about Snake Sanders?" he pursued. "Snake isn't there."

Behind he heard a slight splash. The woman was obeying his command.

"'Tain't Snake!" yelped the boy who had seen them. "Snake's woman! Lou Brackett!"

A mocking chorus swelled out, started by those farthest back.

"Under the bridge with Loo-ou! Under the bridge with Loo-ou!"

Another boy, growing bolder, added a further taunt.

"Wait till Snake hears 'bout it! He'll hop onto ye! Yah!"

"Yah! Under the bridge with Loo-ou!" piped the chorus.

The man's teeth clenched on the pipe-stem, but he kept smiling.

"Hadn't you better be sure you're right before you start tattling tales? What do you think Snake'll do to you when he finds out you lied to him? And what do you think *I'll* do?"

The sudden hush and scared glances around showed that the shot struck home. None wanted to incur the

wrath of Snake Sanders. But the girl who had spied the hidden pair—a gangling creature with eyes too close together—snapped back at him.

"'Tain't no lie! We seen ye—me and Billy!"

"Saw me, yes. But there's no woman under that bridge. Why do you yell out that there is? First thing you know you'll get yourself into trouble."

Another hush. The youngsters began scowling at the pair who had screamed the news.

"She is so!" stubbornly disputed the girl. "I seen her!"

"Now be careful! Want to bet on it?" He drew a bright quarter-dollar from a pocket and held it up. "Want to bet five cents against this quarter that a woman's there? Any woman at all. If you bet and lose, though, I'll make your teacher get the money from you or give you a good hiding. Want to bet?"

The half-score pairs of eyes fastened wolfishly on the gleaming coin. The boy and the girl wavered and remained silent. There might be some trick, and the thought of a thrashing was unpleasant. As Douglas intended, their failure to accept his dare increased the doubt in the minds of the others.

"You don't dare to bet," he laughed sneeringly. "I thought not. Well, now, just to show you you're cross-eyed and didn't see any woman at all, I'll let you look for yourselves. Come on, girls and boys. I won't touch you."

Still they hung back. He drifted slowly toward the bridge, giving Lou Brackett every possible second of time while seeming to urge the children on. On the

bridge itself he darted a side-glance up-stream. Nobody was in sight.

"Come on!" he snapped. "I can't stand here all day."

A bolder spirit among the boys edged forward. In a minute all were coming. Douglas leaned carelessly on the rail and grinned.

"Look under, everybody! I want you all to see that I'm telling it straight. Use your own eyes."

They tumbled down the bank, spied all around, and came up laughing loudly at the pair of informers.

"She's gone!" yelled the boy. "She was here but she run somewheres!"

"Where?" instantly countered Douglas. "You've all been watching this bridge every minute. How could anybody come out without your seeing him—or her? Now, you two had better go and get some glasses. Then maybe you can tell the difference between a rock under the bridge and a woman. If you really saw a woman, why didn't you bet a nickel against my quarter? Because you didn't see any. Isn't that right, youngsters?"

His confident argument, poor as it was, clinched the matter in the simple minds of those who had not seen the woman there. They jeered at the spies, who were sullenly silent just when they should have fought back.

"All right, go on," Douglas waved them away. "Only remember, if I hear any more about this I'll know who told it around, and—you may be sorry." This time he gave the sulky pair a hard look. "Now

run along. I want to finish my smoke without being yelled at."

They went, still poking fun at their discredited companions. For awhile Douglas leaned there, knowing he was watched, and that while he was the focus of attention the woman could move farther away unobserved. Then he knocked out his pipe and sauntered away, directing his steps up the open road toward the schoolhouse.

"H'm! That was a sweet mess, wasn't it?" he reflected. "Maybe that pair of little scandal-mongers will keep their mouths shut, but I doubt it. However, the rest of them didn't see her, and she's out of it with a whole skin—if she has wit enough to get in the first word when Snake shows up. Mister Ha'nt, up to the present you've been a pest, but now you're a friend in need; you got me out of an embarrassing corner quite gracefully. Consider yourself thanked."

Chuckling, he swung smoothly along between the walls of verdure bordering the road, soon reaching a sharp turn where the road angled off to the westward. There stood the little dun schoolhouse, now temporarily deserted. Along both sides of the steep roadway beyond stood small houses quite close together. At the nearest of these was a workshop, and before it toiled an active little man surrounded by new barrels.

Somewhat surprised by the sight of industry at this lazy noon-hour, Douglas slowed his steps as he approached. The man was obviously a cooper; and around one stand of staves he was deftly looping a withe hoop and locking it tight by notches in the withe.

As Douglas halted he rapidly tapped the hoop down into position, gave the barrel a roll, and stopped, foxily watching the stranger.

"Howdy, stranger," he gurgled, shifting a lumpy quid in one cheek.

"Howdy. You look busy."

"Allus busy to this time o' year—folks needs barrels for the apples—keeps me a-hustlin', yessir. But lawsy, what's the use o' livin' if ye don't keep a-movin', says I. Might's well be a stump or a rock, yessir. Some folks'd ruther set and spit tobacker to a rat-hole, but not me. I'd ruther wear out than rust out—I can lay quiet a long time when I'm dead. Ain't that so?"

"Right as a trivet," the blond man heartily approved, noting the keen features and the sandy gray hair. "I'll bet you're a Scotch-Irishman. Am I right?"

"Wal! Ye hit 'er right into the eye, stranger—David McCafferty—that's me. No slow Injun blood or Dutch into me, like some folks round here—I'm awake, I am, yessir! Ye're Hammerless Hampton, o' course. Hearn all 'bout ye, oh, yes."

His shrewd look dwelt a minute on the gun. Then he shot a wary glance around. His next remark came in a hoarse whisper.

"Uncle Eb told me 'bout ye. Fine old feller, Uncle Eb. Been to see him yit?"

"No. Haven't seen him since the line storm. I've been rambling around. Why?"

"Wal, go an' see him now, if ye ain't got nothin'

else onto yer hands. He'd oughter be to home pretty quick—he went out bee-huntin' to-day early. Soon's ye see him tell him Davy says this: there's two strangers a-snoopin' round—come in from the Gap this mornin'—I seen 'em slide into the brush down yender by the schoolhouse, an' they ain't come back. Jest tell him that. He'll know what I mean."

Douglas turned, looked at the road behind, let his eyes rove in the direction the strangers must have taken, and found himself looking at the wall of Dickie Barre—where Steve probably was hiding. He scowled and unconsciously shifted his gun. A subdued chuckle brought his glance back to David, who now was agrin.

"Guess ye think like I do, Hammerless," he added with a swift wink. "Anyways, if ye see Uncle Eb 'fore I do, tell him. I been hopin' he might come back along o' here, but nobody knows where he'll travel to when he gits a-goin'."

"Which is his house?"

"'Bout haff a mile 'long—on the left, beyend the second turn—yeller house facin' Dickabar—the onliest yeller house on the *left* side o' the road. G'by."

He dived at his work again, with a back jerk of the head to urge his messenger on. Douglas swung away with long strides.

At the other houses along his way faces looked out from windows as he passed and heads jutted from doorways when he had gone by, but he did not see them. His gaze ranged ahead, seeking a yellow house on the left. His thoughts were a complex of puzzlement over McCafferty's cryptic last utterances and of

worriment for Steve. He did not reflect on the fact that Steve was an escaped convict: he thought of him only as a hunted victim of the machinations of Snake Sanders and as the wild young sweetheart of Marion, and he resented the coming of men who might be human bloodhounds trailing the unlucky youth. And, though he wondered why honest Uncle Eb should need a warning of the presence of those newcomers, he dismissed the enigma with the guess that this was only a part of the "underground telegraph" system of the Traps, whereby its citizens, good or bad, learned news which might or might not concern them vitally.

Though he did not realize it, he was responding to his environment. The mysterious undercurrent of things unseen, half-guessed—of whispers and winks and silences—of secret movements in the jungly brush and the labyrinth of stones—was eddying around his straightforward nature and deflecting him into the channel where, in time, he might become an integral part of the walled-in stream of life revolving about the bowl. Whether he should ride on the surface of that stream, whether he should float below it like a submerged snag, whether he should suddenly drop to the bottom and be forever lost, only time could tell. But the current was working, and he was drifting with it unawares.

Less than a month ago, as Douglas Hampton, newspaperman, he had had a friendly nod and a smile for every blue-coated patrolman he happened to meet. In his own neighborhood he had known personally every "cop," and some of the plain-clothes "dicks" as well;

and many a time in the dead hours of night, when his own work was done and policemen had little to do but patrol vacant beats, he had stood long in some shadowy corner and yarned with a lonesome guardian of the law. "A fine bunch of fellows," had been his opinion of them then. Yet now, as Hammerless Hampton, his mental reaction to the hint of the arrival of man-trackers was instinctively hostile; hostile, though he himself still was almost universally regarded as a detective. Yes, he was drifting.

But he was not to drift long. The time was close at hand when, in his own mind at least, he must align himself with or against the forces of the law. In fact, every stride he took was narrowing the distance between him and that decision. When he turned into the little dooryard of the only yellow house on the left, he was within ear-shot of the growling voice of the Law. And when he tramped noisily up the steps and looked through the open door at the top he looked squarely into the eyes of the Law itself.

Beyond that door stood three men. One, his hat askew on his silvery hair, was Uncle Eb. The other two, beefy, red-faced, regarding the newcomer with cold eyes, were obviously outsiders. The civilian clothing and blunt-toed shoes, the chilled-steel stare, the untanned hands hovering on a level with the lowest buttons of their vests, the significant bump bulging the coat of the nearer man—over the right rear pocket—all told the same tale to Hampton's quick survey.

There was no guesswork about it this time. The Law was in the Traps.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CODE OF THE HILLS

STANDING there in the doorway, Douglas watched the eyes of the two strangers shift rapidly over him, taking him in from clean-shaven face to laced boots, then returning to the shotgun under his arm. With a cool nod to them, he turned to Uncle Eb—and surprised in the old man's countenance a look of mingled anxiety and hope.

"Howdy, Uncle Eb," he said casually. "Thought I'd drop in a minute and smoke a pipe. Didn't know you had company."

"Come in! Come right in, son!" The explosive voice was even more abrupt than usual. "Where ye been all the time? I been by yer house twice—stopped to see ye—but 'twas all empty like. I was scairt the ha'nt might o' got ye. These fellers—I dunno 'em—they ain't no comp'ny o' mine. I jest got home—been bee-huntin'—found a good tree, too—bet ther's a good fifty pound o' honey into it—these fellers was jest a-comin' into the yard when I come."

The jerky sentences, the strained look, told Douglas that Uncle Eb—Uncle Eb, who had previously asserted that he had no reason to fear detectives—was nervous. Now he thought he caught a meaning flutter of one white-lashed lid and a sidewise flicker of the eyes. But he could not interpret the signal—was not even

sure it was so intended. So he only nodded carelessly.

"Uh-huh. I've been rambling around, or I'd have seen you sooner. Did you get that tobacco for me at High Falls?"

The question was a blind for the benefit of the listening pair. He had given Uncle Eb no commission to bring him more tobacco, and his present stock was more than ample. But the old man snatched instantly at the hint.

"Yas—yas, I did, boy. It's into my bedroom—I'll git it. But I dunno if I got what ye want. Ye didn't tell me what kind, so I got two. Come pick what ye want, an' I'll keep t'other for myself."

He lumbered into another room, Douglas lounging after. The two strangers made slight movements as if to follow, then remained where they were. Uncle Eb had left the door wide open, and the watchers saw that he was taking tobacco cans from the top of an old-fashioned chest of drawers: yellow cans and blue ones.

"They're both slice-cuts," rattled the old man. "Some likes one, some wants t'other. Take yer pick."

Douglas, holding a can in each hand as if considering, knew by their lightness that no tobacco remained in them. They were old tins, saved by the thrifty hillman for any use that might occur to him. He slid a cornerwise glance at Eb.

"Or take both kinds if ye want—I've got some more." Then, hardly moving his lips, the old man breathed: "Steve in barn—go tell him hide in hay!"

Douglas repressed a start. So that was it! Uncle

Eb, loyal to his people though honest in his own life, was sheltering the refugee. And he, Hampton, who previously had had only a passive hand in aiding the fugitive, now must act either to help or to outwit the heavy-handed Law standing beyond the doorway.

According to the smug dictum of all self-righteous society, his duty was plain: to inform the waiting police that an escaped convict lurked within a stone's throw. What matter if he thereby involved Uncle Eb as an accomplice? What though he tore the heart of a girl and threw a boy back into a living tomb? A convict was a convict, duly sentenced by judicial authority, and those who connived to defeat that authority must suffer the consequences. And the girl—what is a girl's grief to the Law?

Such was the code of Respectability. Confronting it was the code of the hills, which this old man was instinctively obeying; the code of natural justice, far more ancient and human than the chain-clanking machinery of legislature and court and prison: *Stand by your own!* On either side of Douglas Hampton they towered, stark and hard as the two great walls of the Traps; and he must either swing on in the Traps current or turn and fight against it.

To a worshipper of codes, the choice might have come hard. To this man it was hardly even a matter for choice. He had his own instinctive code, and backbone enough to follow it through. And now he gave no thought to the beliefs and traditions of either the great world without or the little world within the mountain bowl. He saw only the desperate face of

Steve, heard only the lad's vehement denial of guilt. And he spent no time in pondering over his course.

Not more than five seconds passed between Uncle Eb's whisper and his first move. He nodded, slid the empty cans into separate pockets, and turned doorward.

"Thanks. I'll try 'em both out," he said. "Pay you the next time I see you. That all right?"

"Sure, sure, that's all right—any time, son, any time. Mebbe I'll be drivin' down your way to-morrer, or anyways the next day—I might go after the honey to-morrer. Want to set in an' eat 'fore ye go? I ain't much good of a cook, an' Marthy an' Becky ain't to home to-day—they went a-visitin'—but I got to fix up sumpthin' for myself, an' ——"

"No, I'll be going. Had my lunch just a little while ago."

"Wal, g'by. Which way ye goin'—up back? Wal, say, do sumpthin' for me. Throw down a jag o' hay to the hoss when ye go 'long. Much 'bliged."

Douglas nearly grinned at the old man's adroitness in thus openly turning him toward the barn. But he kept his face expressionless and, with a nod both to Uncle Eb and to the silent man-hunters, loafed toward the exit. Then one of the sinister pair moved and spoke.

"Wait a minute," he commanded bruskly. "What you carryin' that gun for? This ain't huntin' season."

"No?" was the careless retort. "It's always hunting season—for foxes and other vermin."

The second bristled.

"Whatcha mean by voimin?" he growled.

Douglas turned an amused face to him.

"Hello, Brooklyn!" he laughed. "This is the foist time I've hoid that Sands-Street accent since I came up here. How's your thoist?"

The first grinned at the mimicry of his mate. The second, though he still looked truculent, blinked.

"Takes an oily boid to catch a woim up here," gibed the blond man. "But who's the woim? I haven't hoid of any squoiming around on this toif."

Whereat the first man chuckled and the second turned brick-color.

"Whatcha mean by that stuff?" he rasped. "How'd ya git the idear I was lookin' for anybody? You know too much, you do. Come on, now, I guess me and you'll have a little talk. And you can lay that gun down on the floor, see?"

Douglas laughed derisively.

"I know I can—but I won't. Just go easy, Mister Bull, and don't monkey with the works. You're talking to a big-town boy now, and that stuff doesn't go. And if you think you're disguised so that I can't spot you, think again. Those flatfoot shoes are a dead give-away, not to mention your hip-bump and your cop face."

"Yeah? Guess you're in the habit of watchin' for them things, hey? And whatcha doin' up here, my fine boid? Kind of a funny place for a big-town boy to hang out, ain't it, huh? What was the last name you went by?"

He was moving, almost imperceptibly, to get Douglas

between him and his companion. The blond man foiled the attempt by taking one swift side-step and getting his back to the open doorway.

"Don't make a fool of yourself," he advised wearily. "You can't scare me that way in a year of Sundays. Just to satisfy you—though it's none of your business—I'm Hampton, of the New York *Whirl,* up here on a vacation. If you get too obstreperous, Mister Man, I can give you a lovely write-up when I get back to town—that kind that may let you out of your job. Go easy."

The other halted where he was. The name of the *Whirl* and the thinly veiled threat coupled with it stopped him dead; for it conjured up the vision dreaded by every officer, even though he may affect to scoff at it—the possibility of being held up to scorn in the public prints. He understood now why this fellow refused to be bulldozed, why he laughed in his face—he was "one o' them newspaper guys," than whom there is no more nervy and disrespectful tribe on earth; whose friendship is worth much to any police officer, and whose enmity is not to be lightly incurred. Naturally, he did not know that Hampton was no longer connected with newspaperdom.

"You on the *Whoil?*" he growled, a crafty light in his eyes. "Who's city editor there now?"

"Chapman, of course. Same old grouch he always was, too."

The other nodded grudgingly. City Editor Chapman was known far and wide in both newspaper and police circles for his uncanny news ability and his

vitriolic temper. This fellow's knowledge of Chapman and his impudent assurance carried conviction.

"All right, Hampton. Guess you're O. K. Know this fella?" He nodded toward Uncle Eb.

"Sure. He's as honest as they make 'em. What are you fellows in here for? Got anything good?"

"Nope—nothin' you'd want," was the hasty cover-up. "I ain't woikin' in the big town now—this is a little up-river stuff. Me and my pal's jest lookin' round for some small-fry. Don't let us keep ya. So long."

Douglas laughed openly. The burly man now was even more anxious to be rid of him than he was to go to the barn.

"Oh, all right. Let's see, who did you say you were? And from where?"

"Didn't say. So long, fella. So long."

He turned his back squarely on his questioner. The other man, who had been searchingly watching Douglas, now directed his gaze elsewhere and also turned an aloof shoulder to him. Douglas shot a wink at Uncle Eb and strolled out.

"G'by, son," called the old man. "Don't forgit the hoss."

"Oh, sure. I'll fix him up. See you later."

With lazy step he sauntered up to the little yellow barn, whose sliding door stood open a few inches. Once inside, he dropped his languid air in a flash.

"Steve!" he called softly, peering around. "Steve!"

No answer came. In a dark stall a horse moved and

stamped. Somewhere down below sounded the grunts of hogs which had heard his steps. But of human movement, of human voice, there was no sign.

"Steve!" he whispered loudly. "Where are you? Get into the hay! Quick!"

Again there was no sound. But movement came. Under a stair-flight leading aloft in the dimmest corner, something slipped cautiously into sight—first an ear, then a cheek, then a peeping eye. It hung there, waist-high, watching the man go squinting into the stalls and around him.

"Steve! This is Hamp! Uncle Eb says ——"

"Awright!"

The whispered reply, hoarse and penetrating, cut short his speech and turned him stairward. The eye became two, and the face rose as if the concealed youth were getting up from his knees.

"What's he say?" demanded Steve.

"Get into the hay! Two bulls are here—in the house—may come here any minute—get under cover quick."

"Uh-huh." Steve darted forth. "I seen 'em. Figgered I better hide into this 'ere hole an' mebbe duck out if they went up 'bove. Would of skipped outen here, but the side house-winder looks right to the barn an' I s'picioned they'd see me."

He was already on his way upward. Douglas followed close behind. They emerged into a small hayloft, crammed with the season's crop of horse-fodder. At each end, high up in the peak but now level with the piled hay, a small window let in light. In

that light the two stood an instant looking at each other.

Though the desperate look of the hunted still was on the fugitive's face, he looked far better than when Douglas had carried him into the den among the bowlders. Then he had been wan, pinched, utterly exhausted. Now his cheeks were more round, his eyes unrimmed by blue crescents, his swarthy skin tinged by healthy color. Food and sleep in plenty had transformed him from a hatchet-faced wreck to a not unhandsome young man. But the hard set of the mouth and the glitter of the dark eyes still were there.

"I'll never go back!" he whispered fiercely. "I had three years o' misery—for a job I never done—an' them dicks wunt git me back. I'll kill 'em—I'll git shot—I'll jump offen the ledges an' bust my neck—anythin'—but I ain't a-goin' back! An' I got to git Snake 'fore anybody gits me. I—— *Shuh!* What's that? They comin'?"

He bounded up on the great mound and peered out. Douglas flashed a glance around. His eyes halted on the other window—the rear one. It was open.

"They're a-comin'! They're a-going to look round into here! I got to git under!"

Outside sounded Uncle Eb's loud voice, angrily protesting against search of his premises. The two man-trailers were stonily silent.

"No!" decided Douglas. "If they're suspicious they'll look in the hay. You get outside! Through that window—I'll steady you—swing up over the eaves and hug the roof. And lie quiet!"

Steve, with the ruthless Law almost upon him, blindly obeyed. Across to the rear window they plunged over the hay. The boy wriggled through the opening, turned his face inward, reached for the eaves above. Douglas braced himself, grasped the bare ankles, heaved upward. A clawing sound above—a spasmodic kick—a squirming struggle—the legs broke free and vanished. Followed a soft bump or two, a short scraping sound—and silence.

"I tell ye, ye ain't got no right into my place without a search warrant!" stormed Uncle Eb below. "I ain't got nothin' to hide, but I got the same rights any other honest man's got. Show yer warrant! I forbid ye into this place!"

"Ah, call in yer lawyer and we'll talk to him," sounded the sneering answer. "Go sit down and hold yer head. We won't damage nothin'. Looks bad, too, you gittin' so woiked up when you got nothin' to hide. Hey, Ward?"

Douglas reached down and rapidly loosened the lacing of one boot. Then he went back across the hay and sat down. At once a heavy foot sounded on the stairs.

"Hey, up there! You, Hampton?"

"Right both times—there's hay up here, and I'm Hampton," drawled the man above.

"Huh! Bill, go up and take a look. I'll see that nothin' slides out down here."

The red face of Bill, ex-Brooklynite, rose above the floor, glowering around.

"Well, whatcha doin', Hampton?" he growled.

"Thought ya was feedin' the horse, but I notice he ain't fed yet. Slow, ain't ya?"

"Oh, I take my time. And right now I'm straightening up my sock. Ever have a sock wrinkle under your heel? Makes a beautiful blister. Horses can wait until my foot is fixed to suit me."

Red-Face grunted and keenly surveyed the mow. Douglas coolly laced up the boot, as if completing what he had been doing when interrupted; stretched his leg, worked his foot up and down, and nodded as if satisfied.

"That feels better," he announced. "Well, Statue of Liberty, what's all the heavy thinking about? Or are you only trying to look wise and pretending to think?"

The other's heavy mouth twisted in an ugly grin. He reached for a pitchfork standing near, yanked it free from the hay, inspected its long gleaming tines.

"Funny as a toothache, ain't ya! One of these days, fella, that mouth o' yourn'll git ya into a box," he predicted. "Right now I got other things to poke into. Jest come down off that hay—unless you're coverin' somethin' up. That's right. Ya mind like ma's angel-face, don't ya? Now watch what I toin up!"

With a leap he came up. And with a shrewd jab he drove the fork down into the hay on which Douglas had been sitting.

CHAPTER XIV

COLD NERVE

AGAIN and again the man-hunter stabbed at the hay, moving about with each new attack, lunging more viciously as his searching prods brought no result. Douglas felt a little chilly as he visualized what might have happened if Uncle Eb's advice had not been disregarded at the last minute. And the old man down below, hearing the loud rustle of the dried grass and knowing nothing of the change in Steve's place of refuge, lost his grip on himself.

With a yell he came thundering up the stairs, his walrus mustache bristling like tusks and his jaw jutting as if about to bite.

"*Git* offen that hay!" he bellowed. "*Git* outen here! An' git quick, 'fore I muckle onto ye. I'll sling ye head-fust outen the winder! *Git!*"

The man above had jumped about and swung the fork menacingly before him. Infuriated still further by the sight of his own hay-tool turned against him, the old warrior sprang up the sloping side of the mow, panting inarticulate threats. But he collided with Douglas, who slid down at him and clinched.

"Hold your horses, Uncle Eb!" he exhorted. "He's not hurting the hay or smoking in it—only

jabbing the fork into it, for some reason or other. Let him fool around. Whoa! Quiet down!"

But Eb's blood was up, and he knew no reason why he should quiet down. He fought to break free, and the younger man found his hands very full. Tussling mightily, they reeled about at the foot of the slope, in imminent danger of slipping over the edge of the open gap in the floor and crashing down the steep stairs. The man Ward, who had bounded part-way up to aid his companion if necessary, took one look and hastily got from under. His mate Bill, still holding the fork poised for defense, grinned nastily at the grappling pair.

Douglas got his chin on Eb's shoulder and ventured a whisper from the corner of his mouth.

"It's all right. He's not there."

It took some seconds for his meaning to penetrate the old fellow's raging brain, but Douglas managed to hold him until he understood. Then all at once he ceased struggling. Too, he quick-wittedly gave a deceptive excuse for his outbreak.

"Fellers come into here—actin' like they was the King o' Rooshia an' I was a dawg," he panted. "Ain't got no search warrant—think they can sass me right into my own house—tromp onto my hay an' spile it for the hosses—they got to git out!"

"That's right, too," Douglas nodded. "I know how you feel. But the best way is to let the smart-Alecks show themselves that they're wrong—and then, if they don't apologize, report them to the right authorities. I can tell you where to send the report."

At that Bill glowered anew. He glowered still more when Douglas turned to him with sarcastic permission to continue.

"You, up there, go on amusing yourself if you like. Mr. Wilham here will take his amusement later—when you're trying to explain to your superiors why you took it on yourselves to molest a peaceable citizen. Maybe he'll get more fun out of it in the long run than you will. So go ahead playing hay-maker—it's a nice game for little boys. When you get through, bring down a forkful for the horse. It'll save me the trouble."

Bill's mouth became a thin line. He looked as if about to heave the fork at his tormentor. But after one long glare he doggedly returned to his search, speaking not a word. Had any fugitive been under that hay now, however, he would undoubtedly have died under the vindictive lunges of the fork.

Foot by foot he bayoneted the mow, from end to end and from side to side. Douglas watched with a tantalizing grin, Uncle Eb in silent perturbation—wondering where Steve was but not daring to ask by word or look. From above came no sound. Steve was lying quiet as the dead.

In Hampton's mind grew a big suspicion. These men were conducting themselves as if acting on previous information: as if told by some one that here they would find what they sought. It was preposterous to suppose that they would go thus through the entire Traps, jabbing every hay-loft, riding rough-shod over every man's right to call his home his castle.

They had come in only that morning, gone up toward the bowlders—and then come to the one place where the refugee was. It might be blind chance, but—yes, Douglas was suspicious.

Finally the man Bill, with an oath, threw down the fork. His face was redder than ever, streaked with sweat, itching from hay-dust. He mopped a hand over his prickly cheeks, scratched his head violently, bent a baleful glare on the two below. Then he came wallowing out of the ragged mass he had stirred up.

"Say, bring along that horse-feed, will you? We've been waiting long enough," complained Douglas. As if in emphasis, an impatient whinny sounded below.

Another oath exploded from the badgered Bill. He slid clumsily down and stood looking as if aching to punch the grinning mouth. But he did not punch. Swallowing something, he pointed downward.

"Git down-stairs!" he rasped. "You, Hampton, you got in here foist, but ya'll stay where I can see ya from now on. G'wan! Move!"

The blue eyes narrowed at the dictatorial tone and the half-spoken accusation. But then Douglas smiled again—an exasperating smile.

"*When* I've fed the horse," he singsonged. "*Then*, if I feel like it. But there, Uncle Eb, maybe you'd better do the feeding, now that you're here. If I laid this gun down I might lose it. Some folks can't be trusted."

Uncle Eb cackled harshly. Bill moved his right arm quickly, but stopped it. Douglas still smiled, but his eyes were cold and his gun gripped in a ready-looking

fist. Ward, whose head had risen again on the stairs, watched like a cat, one hand under his coat.

Deliberately Uncle Eb gathered a big armful of hay, crowded past Bill with it, dropped it on the open chute to the horse's bin and stuffed it down with a small two-tined fork standing at hand. Then he returned to the stairs and clumped down them, Ward giving way but holding his position.

"After you, my dear Bill," bowed Douglas. "Oh, don't be afraid. The *Whirl* may jump on your neck one of these days, but not this afternoon. G'wan!"

At the patrolman-like twang of the last word Ward grinned slightly. He evidently had a sense of humor. Bill looked at him, at Douglas—then trod to the stairs and down. Douglas followed.

Below, the pair conducted a rapid but extremely thorough search of the ground floor. Meal-chests, barrels, stalls, the covert under the stairs—every nook and corner where a man could possibly be hidden was looked into. When they still found no sign of what they sought, they paused and looked hard at each other.

"Any cellar under here?" demanded Ward.

"If ye call a hawg-pen a cellar, yas," snapped Uncle Eb. "Go look into it—waller round into it—ask the hawgs what they had for breakfas'—wait awhile an' mebbe I'll feed ye some swill along with 'em."

"Say, whatcha mean by that?" snarled Bill.

"I mean ye was brought up into a hawg-pen an' that's where ye belong!" flared Eb. "That plain 'nough for ye?"

It was. Bill started for the old man. But Douglas stepped between them. He said nothing; he only looked. Bill liked the look so ill that he slowed, then stopped.

"An' after ye've shook hands with yer brothers ye can come an' go all over the house, like ye was goin' to when ye got s'picious an' follered Hampton down here," jeered Eb. "I don't let pigs into my house as a gin'ral thing, but ——"

"That'll be about enough of that!" Ward broke in. "Keep a civil tongue in your head."

"—But this once, I'll do it, seein' ye've gone so fur now," Uncle Eb continued, ignoring him. "I can air out the house when ye're gone. Hurry up now. Look under the beds an' into the oven an' all—an' then git offen my land an' stay off!"

The two looked keenly at him for a full half-minute.

"Since you're so willing, we won't," announced Ward. Bill nodded sulkily, looking again around the barn. Ward rubbed his jowl and spat on the floor.

"What d'you make of it, Bill?" he puzzled.

"Somebody lied!" was the morose answer.

"Yeah. Looks like it. Well, let's travel."

Douglas, shrewdly watching, loosed a snap shot.

"Don't you fellows know any better than to believe Sanders?"

The slight start, the involuntary flicker of the eyelids, told him that his shot had scored.

"Uh—whatcha mean? We ain't seen Sanders," blurted Bill.

"No? I notice that you know his name, though.

How much did he shake you down for? You'd better get it back, quick."

The pair scowled at each other. Bill, with a growl, started for the door. Ward halted him.

"Hold up, Bill. No hurry," he said. "What about Sanders, Hampton?"

"Only this much: Folks around here think I'm a detective. Sanders thought so too. He offered to get me any man I wanted—for half the reward. If the man wasn't here, he offered to sell me some fellow who hadn't done anything but who could be railroaded—for the right price. He bragged that he could sell anybody, and that he'd done that kind of business before. Does that line of talk sound familiar?"

The scowls grew deeper.

"Some of it," Ward admitted. "Not the railroad part of it, but—some of it. Well, say, Hampton, I'm sure obliged to you for that. Sell anybody, eh? That means the fellow he's dealing with, too. Uh-huh. Bill, let's you and me take a walk."

Bill, with another growl, started forward again. But Douglas was not yet through.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked pointedly, moving his head toward Uncle Eb.

"That's right," Ward acknowledged. "I'm sorry, Mr.—uh—Williams—Wilson ——"

"Wilham!" barked Eb. "I ain't got nothin' ag'in *you*. It's this here hawg." His frosty eyes glinted at the offensive Bill.

"How about it, Bill?" queried Ward, his tongue in his cheek.

Bill turned sourly, heavy jaw set. But he attempted amends.

"Sorry, old fella," he mumbled. "We got a bad steer. We ain't hoit ya, have we? We gotta do our dooty. We—uh ——"

"All right, let it go at that," Douglas interposed. All four moved out of the barn. As they emerged, Douglas began speaking a little louder, so that Steve could hear. And, to keep the pair from glancing back and perhaps seeing what was on the roof, he walked toward the house, talking over one shoulder.

"If you want to find Sanders, you'd better go straight down the road and hunt his house. He'll probably be there at meal-time, if not before. Where does he live, Uncle Eb?"

"Way over t'other side, not sech a long ways from the Gap," Eb answered readily. "He comes an' goes by cross-cuts, but ye better stick to the road. Ye turn into the Clove road down past the schoolhouse, keep on till ye've crossed the crick twice—it sorter wanders round an' ther's bridges acrost—an' then ther's a kind of a wood-road bearin' off to yer right. Go up that an' ye'll find Snake's house. Ye'll be 'bout the onliest comp'ny thar. Nobody visits much with Snake."

They were turning into the dooryard before the house now, Bill and Ward morosely eyeing the road and trying to fix in mind the unfamiliar turns as described by Uncle Eb. Douglas stole a glance beyond them. One side of the barn roof was in plain sight now. And on that side, a quarter of the way down, was Steve.

Hugging the shingles, he was craftily working eavesward from the ridge to which he had clung. With bare toes and flattened hands holding him from too sudden a slip down the pitch, he was sliding himself lower and lower on his stomach. When he should reach the eaves, it would be only a matter of a short drop to the ground and a quick jump around the corner, and he would be out of sight. But if his pursuers should happen to look that way now ——

"Look here," Douglas said quickly, stooping and tracing a line with his gun-butt, "here's the road. Now you go down this way, and then ——"

Moving the weapon, keeping his eyes glued to his crude map, he talked on, holding their attention. They followed every move. And behind them the ragged figure on the barn roof descended until its feet hung out over the eaves. There it hesitated an instant, balancing itself for the final slip and drop.

Douglas dared not look. Playing for time, he appealed to Uncle Eb for information regarding some fictitious road which might branch off before the right one should be reached. Eb's eyes were crinkled with amusement, for he saw that the younger man was inventing most of his road-map; but he kept his face straight, disputed a couple of turns, and put down a gnarled finger to make a new section of the course.

Bill began to stir impatiently. His eyes wandered.

"Yeah, we'll git there," he broke in. "Come on, Ward."

"When you get there, look out for snakes!" warned

Douglas, striking for his wandering attention. He got it. Bill faced him again.

"Snakes! Whatcha mean?"

"Sanders has a fondness for snakes—bad ones. He may have a few around where you can step on them. Keep your eyes peeled."

At that moment sounded a soft thump at the side of the barn. Ward started to turn.

"Copperheads—rattlers—poisonous!" asserted Douglas loudly. "Watch out for 'em!"

Ward's eyes hung on his a couple of seconds longer, held by the warning. Then he turned and looked toward the barn.

"What's that bump?" he muttered.

"Horse moving around, or a hog down below. Don't forget those snakes."

Then Douglas looked. Only the old barn met his anxious gaze. Ward, after a speculative glance around, nodded and started away.

"All right. See you later, maybe. So long."

Followed by Bill, he stepped briskly to the road. Along the lumpy wheel-ruts in the sand they trudged, their voices floating back in growling tones that boded ill for somebody. Then the roadside brush-growth blotted out their receding figures, and the only sound was the cheerful chorus of the crickets in the grass.

CHAPTER XV

FIRE AND FROST

Douglas took a long breath. Uncle Eb swung to him.

"Wha'd ye do with him?" he hoarsely asked.

In guarded tones Douglas outlined the ruse which had saved Steve. As he finished he strode out to the side of the road and looked down it. The two man-hunters still were in sight, plodding along without a backward look.

"By mighty! Ye've got a head onto ye like a tack, son," congratulated Eb, who had followed. "Right after I told them fellers to look into the hawg-pen I nigh got a shock—it come to me ye might of hid the boy into thar. Thank Gawd ye was here—I dunno what I'd done without ye ——"

"All right. Now listen. You go back and get Steve under cover again quick. Those fellows may not be so well convinced as they seem to be, and they might double back after they're out of sight. I'm going to follow them up now and see if they keep on going. I'll be back."

As he spoke, Bill and Ward faded from sight around a little curve. He strode away after them. Uncle Eb hastened to the barn.

Along the straight open stretch of road—perhaps

forty yards from house to curve—Douglas traveled at a half-lope. As he went, a smile grew on his mouth, culminating in a chuckle.

"Hammerless Hampton, you're an obstructionist, a conspirator against the majesty of the law, a disreputable character all around," he told himself. "And sooner or later—probably sooner—you're going to get yourself in bad. When Brooklyn Bill gets back to the river, for instance, he may query New York and learn that you're disowned by the *Whirl*, and so on. And then what?"

Instead of growing serious at the thought of that possibility, however, he laughed all the more as he imagined Bill's lurid language on learning that he had been duped. He was still laughing when he reached the bend. But there, in one instant, his face froze.

A few rods farther on stood the pair of officers. Their backs were toward him, their shoulders touched, their burly bodies blocked the narrow way. Beyond their legs showed a skirt.

The skirt was jerking about, and under it bare ankles moved quickly, as if the woman or girl were struggling to get away. The shoulders of one of the men, too, moved as if his hands were gripping an active prisoner. Then the men swung apart an instant, and in the space between them gleamed sunlit red hair.

Douglas bounded forward, his feet making little noise in the soft sand. Before the intent couple heard him he was upon them. Straight between them he plunged, shoving them violently asunder. From the

girl broke a cry. She was Marion, and both her wrists were clutched in the heavy fists of Bill.

"Hey! Ya big bum, whatcha doin'?" Bill blared furiously. Ward's face too was dark with anger over the thump he had received, and one hand hung menacingly at his hip.

"I'll show you mighty sudden what I'm doing! Let her go!"

Bill released the girl—but not in obedience to the command. He did it because he wanted to use his hands on Douglas more than on her. Ugly-jawed, he stepped forward.

Douglas stepped back, handed his gun to Marion, and fronted Bill with fists poised for the first parry and counter-punch. Marion sprang aside, face ablaze with wrath, gun up. Ward, seeing Douglas give up the weapon to her and stand bare-handed, relaxed from his tense poise and swiftly grew cool.

Bill shot a vicious punch at the blond man's chin—a straight drive which would have downed his man if it had landed. But Douglas ducked to the left and snapped a retaliating right for the beefy jaw. It halted short—his wrist caught and held by Ward. Now Ward yanked him back.

"Two to one, eh?" raged Douglas. "All right ——"

"No!" clipped Ward. Gripping the blond man's arms, he swung himself between the antagonists. "Let up! Same goes for you, Bill! Cut it!"

With a powerful shove he sent Douglas staggering backward, at the same time releasing his hold.

"That'll be about all!" he snapped. "Drop this where it is."

"I'm not dropping it!" panted Douglas. "Manhandling girls may get by down where you come from, but it doesn't go with me. Officers? Pah! You cheap thugs ——"

"That'll do!" Ward repeated. "You listen to me a minute."

His steady gaze, his resolute tone, his quiet authority, had their effect. Despite himself, Douglas respected the man. He stood still.

"I ain't blamin' you," Ward continued evenly. "You act like a man. But the girl brought it on herself—and she ain't hurt a bit. Bill oughtn't have grabbed her, maybe, but that's his way. I don't like it myself—him and me have had words about that kind of stuff before—but the girl ain't hurt and she wouldn't be hurt, whether you butted in or not. We only asked her somethin' about the road, and she sassed us and tried to shove Bill off into the ditch. He grabbed her hands and told her to learn some manners, and then she tried to fight him, so naturally he hung onto her. That's all there is to it. I'd drop it, if I was you."

Douglas looked at her. True enough, she showed no sign of hurt, except perhaps to her vivid temper. Ward's straightforward manner was convincing. So were the memories of his own denunciation by the girl on the night when he had met her and of her fiery fight that morning to regain her sketch. And so were the words of Marion herself.

"You big hog!" she flared, holding the gun pointed at Bill as if aching to use it. "You better git outen the Traps and stay out! My manners are good enough for me and my folks, and if you wasn't brought up to give other folks half of the road you can't learn me anything. You keep on actin' like you started, and somebody'll shoot some manners into *you,* I shouldn't wonder. I've got a good mind to do it my own self!"

Under the lash of her tongue, the blaze of her eyes, and the menace of the twin muzzles yawning at his midriff, Bill blinked rapidly and stepped backward. Ward too looked uneasy—for an angry woman and a gun make a decidedly dangerous combination; the more so, because the woman may shoot without actually realizing what she is doing.

"That gun loaded?" he muttered to Douglas.

"Sure. But the safety's on and she doesn't know the mechanism. Of course, she might accidentally slip it, and then—your pal wouldn't look very good. I'd advise you two to make tracks down the road and keep on making them. And one word more to you, Ward. You talk straight, and I'll let this drop for now; but you'd better pick another running-mate before you go again among hill people. This man might do as a Bowery cop or a prison guard, but he's no good in wildcat country."

Ward nodded about a quarter of an inch, as if he agreed, and studied his mate with a slightly disgusted look. Then he shrewdly appraised the girl behind the gun. When he spoke again there was a little twinkle of admiration in his eye.

"Wildcat country's right. Don't blame you for hangin' around this neck of the woods, Hampton. Don't blame you a-tall. Well, so long. Bill!"

The last word crackled. Bill, still edging away from the gaping muzzles, obeyed Ward's thumb-jerk along the road. Passing Douglas, he paused to glower hatefully into the slitted blue eyes watching him. Then he shuffled onward.

Not until they had rounded another turn did Douglas take his unswerving gaze from their backs. Then, as he relaxed, he realized that Ward had shown no suspicion over his sudden appearance; recalled, too, the twinkle and the parting remarks. The man had thought he and Marion had a tryst. Could he have looked back through the trees, however, and studied the girl, he would have begun to wonder.

Douglas, too, wondered as he looked at her. The snap of anger had vanished from her eyes, the flush from her cheeks, the girlishness from her figure. The gray orbs watching him now were cold as ice—ice with a smouldering flame far below its surface. Her face and her poise were as stony as any upright bowlder standing under Dickie Barre. From one hand hung his gun, its muzzles now buried in the sand. Straight, forbidding, she stood looking fixedly at him. And, though he was not expecting any thanks for what he had done, he stood staring blankly back at her. This was a girl whom he never had seen before.

"Well! What's wrong?" he puzzled. "Seems to be a sudden frost."

Unspeaking, she lifted the gun and held it toward

him. He took it, peered at it as if seeking on it the cause of her hauteur, looked up and found her turning away. She took half a dozen steps toward the Wilham home, straight as an Indian, proud as a princess, before he moved. Then he began striding after her. At once she stopped.

"Thought you was goin' the other way," she said pointedly.

"Did you? Well, I'm going this way now."

"I'd ruther you'd go on to where you started for."

His mouth tightened a little.

"I would," he coolly informed her, "but I told Uncle Eb I'd come back."

"Oh. Then I'll wait. Go 'long."

Again he stared. As before, she met him eye to eye, cold and uncompromising.

"What's wrong, Marion?" he repeated. "I don't understand."

"Don't you? I should think you might, if you'd think back a little ways. Now I don't want to walk with you."

His chin lifted. "Oh. I see. It's Steve. All right. But if he's still at Uncle Eb's I'll tell him you're coming. I won't be there long."

She started.

"No—what—how'd you know he's—what you got to do with Steve?"

"Ask Steve. He'll tell you all about it. Good-day."

With that he was off. She stood motionless, watching his receding shoulders, her head lifted at the same proud angle. But, as he disappeared around the curve

from which he had sprung to her rescue, that haughty head slowly drooped. She set her teeth into one red lip. The clear gray eyes became blurred with tears.

Beyond the curve, Douglas stalked rapidly on. Into the Wilham yard he marched with never a backward glance, and, after a quick look toward the barn, up into the open doorway of the house. Uncle Eb, cheek bulging with a chunk of bread-and-cheese, nodded to him from the table where he was devouring his belated cold lunch.

"Shet the door," he suggested. Douglas closed it. "Them fellers gone?"

"They're on their way. They're sore at each other now, as well as at Sanders. Where's our friend?"

"Down cellar. Ther's a winder he can git out by if he has to. What's them fellers mad 'bout now?"

Douglas briefly told him. Uncle Eb stopped chewing, looked at him keenly, cackled out all at once, then wondered: "Why didn't Marry come 'long with ye?"

"I don't know. Said she didn't want to walk with me. So I jest walked right 'long by my own self."

The old man looked quizzically at him, then cackled again.

"Ye're a-gittin' to talk like ye b'longed into the Traps," he chuckled. "An' after what ye done this afternoon, boy, ye do b'long! 'Most anybody with the right kind of a heart round here would a-helped that pore misfortunit boy, but 'tain't every feller from outside, like you, would a-done it. An' that Marry gal—she prob'ly thinks ye're a detective, like the rest. She'll soon know dif'rent."

"Never mind. But now, Uncle Eb, I don't like to ask questions that don't concern me, but just what did Steve do that sent him to the pen?"

Uncle Eb hesitated, chewed hard, swallowed, and gulped a noisy drink of cold coffee.

"The wust thing into the world, son—he got caught. He never done no harm, but gittin' caught for a thing is 'nough, whether ye done it or not. S'posin' we let him talk for hisself."

He stamped twice on the floor. A couple of minutes later a door silently opened and Steve stepped up from the cellar stairs. After one glance he leaped to Douglas' side and gripped his hand.

"Hamp!" he gulped. "Ye're a white man! I ain't a-goin' to forgit this. Jest wait till I git my chance to pay ye some way ——"

"Oh, forget it! Man alive, I don't want any pay. If you owe anything to anybody it's to Uncle Eb, not to me. I just blundered in and had a lot of fun with those fellows. Uncle Eb's the one to thank."

"I ain't a-forgittin' Uncle Eb—he knows it. But the way ye took holt ——"

"All right, all right, let it slide. But now, if you don't mind telling me, what's it all about? What are those fellows after you for? Don't tell me if you don't want to."

"Why, don't ye know? Wal, if that ain't —— Ye jest went ahead an' helped me anyways, huh? My Gawd! I didn't s'pose there was sech folks into the world.

"It's this way, Hamp. We pick a lot o' berries

round here into the summer—not right here into the Traps, but 'way over to Long Pond an' miles an' miles further 'long the mount'ins—an' sell 'em to dealers. An' other fellers come from down b'low to do the same —it'd take a hull army to pick 'em all, they're so thick. Some o' them fellers are pretty hard. An' when some of us folks from here was pickin' round Three-Mile Post, I fit with the Bump boys—three of 'em, brothers, that lived down 'bout a mile outside o' the Wall over yender, onto the road to Paltz.

"Wal, they licked me—three of 'em, all bigger'n me. They licked me bad. Course, I was crazy mad, an' I swore to Gawd I'd come down outen the Traps some day an' buckshoot 'em, an' burn their house an' I dunno what all. But there was four weeks more o' pickin', an' the Bumps went somewheres else, an' I got cooled off, an' by the time I got back here to the Traps I'd made up my mind to leave 'em 'lone. An' I did.

"Wal, it run 'long awhile, an' huntin' season come, an' then one night Snake Sanders got me full o' licker an' says we'll go down b'low an' git us some coons—he knowed where we could git a passel of 'em. I'd oughter knowed better'n to go anywheres with him, but I was fool 'nough to go 'long, an' he gimme more licker, an' we tromped an' tromped, an' I had more licker, an' so on. An' then, fust thing I knowed, we was nigh a house an' barn, an' our coon-dog warn't nowheres round, an' I was gittin' awful drunk. An' Snake says, 'Lay down awhile an' ye'll feel better.' An' I laid down.

"Then, next I knowed, my gun blew off—*bung bung!*—an' men was runnin' an' hosses screechin' an' the barn was all afire, a-blarin' out all round so 'twas light as day. An' Snake was gone, an' all to once I see 'twas the Bump place that was afire, an' somethin' told me to git. So I run as fast as ever I could, never takin' my gun or nothin'. But bimeby I was way up the road, an' it was all dark, an' I got tired an' set down to rest. An' then the licker got a-holt o' me an' I went off to sleep.

"Wal, that was the end o' me. They found me a-layin' into the road an' they pounded me 'most to death an' drug me out an' tried me for arson an' 'tempted murder an' I dunno what all. I didn't have no more chance than a baby chipmunk into a hawk's nest. I couldn't prove nothin', and they wouldn't b'lieve nothin', an' they got proof o' what I'd swore to do to them Bumps, an'—they gimme the limit.

"An' these three years I been doin' time an' gittin' knocked round an'—oh Gawd! An' Snake, he's been a-settin' up here laffin' at me an' the Bumps—he was ag'in 'em, I dunno what for, an' he used me to git all the blame for burnin' up their place an' their hosses an' pigs an' shootin' Charlie Bump—Charlie he got buckshot into him an' the hull place was burnt—an' I got the limit—but I'll git him—I'll git him ——"

He was growing incoherent, his eyes glazing with concentrated hate and fury. Douglas thumped him repeatedly on the shoulder and broke in on his talk.

"All right, Steve, all right! Buck up, now! Your

turn's coming—take a grip on yourself! Keep your head until those bulls leave, and lie low."

The youth gritted his teeth and swallowed hard.

"I'm a-layin' low," he asserted hoarsely. "I'm a-keepin' my head an' my grip. I ain't a-goin' back to no pen. But when oncet I git to a gun ——"

He swallowed again and pawed with one lean hand at his throat. Douglas nodded, his own face sombre. Uncle Eb cleared his throat like a gunshot.

"I don't hold with shootin' yer enemies," he erupted. "I never yit shot at a man, an' I don't b'lieve into it. Still an' all, I dunno as I blame ye much. But ye got to lay lower than ever now, an' lay somewheres else. Snake sent them fellers here—they as good as said so—an' they'll be back, I bet. Come dark, I'll take ye over into the rocks. I got some old clo'es an' a hoss-blankit ye can wrop up into, an' I'll send ye food right 'long reg'lar if Marry'll take it—she's spryer than I be."

"And I'll be going now," Douglas added. "I'm keeping her waiting. She's down the road, Steve—wouldn't walk with me. Take care of yourself—and of her. So long."

Before Steve or Uncle Eb could reply he was out of the house. Across the road he went, pausing a moment to beckon to the stubborn little red-haired figure which now, walking very slowly, was approaching from the curve. She made no answering signal, gave no sign that she saw him. Climbing over the stone wall beyond, he marched away across-lots, face set stiffly toward the frowning wall of Dickie Barre and the invisible Clove Road.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

One by one the October days and nights stole in from the nebulous realm of To-morrow and, like pearls magically taking form on an enchanted thread of gold, added themselves to the memory-gems of Yesterday. Each morning found a new jewel vaguely appearing out of the wan dawn-light; every passing hour imperceptibly shaped the growing form; each rising moon looked down on the completely rounded treasure, nestling beside its mates which had come before. No two were quite alike, for each was tinted with its own delicate hues—the flush of a rosy sunrise, the blue of the sky and the gray of the clouds, the leaden tinge of rain, the sombre shadows of dusk, the brilliant gleams of the stars. Yet no one of them was all-sufficient; it was the blending, the intermingling, of all of them that produced, or would produce, the perfect circle.

And as the unseen hand of their Maker placed on each its own peculiar tints, so the gentle fingers of Mother Nature also worked unceasingly on the mantle she had worn since the springtime, weaving into its monotone new and ever-changing touches of color. This was her play-day, this season between the sum-

mer and the snow; and with scarlet and crimson, with yellow and cream, with the palest of green and the rustiest brown, she transformed her emerald cloak into a gay robe on which the dusky evergreens, hitherto merged into the sweeping expanse of verdure, now stood out bold and clear. Too, by night she painted dingy house-roofs and rickety wagons and all the other ugly man-made things—painted them gray-white with frost, which the new sun quickly blackened and sent creeping down the shingles to drip gently from the eaves of a morning. And as that sun mounted the Wall and rolled its warmth over into the Traps below, she coyly loosed white clouds of mist to go drifting along over the new colors she had made in the dark hours, presently to draw them aside and reveal to human eyes the glory of her handiwork.

Yet it was love's labor lost, this wondrous wizardry of hers—or almost lost. Of all the eyes which daily opened in the Traps, few gave more than a casual glance to all the enchantment wrought around them. Most of those eyes turned inward upon the stomachs of their owners, seeing only the "pannicakes" and gravy, the "buttermilk pop" and other components of breakfast; or they looked at pigs and hens and cows. Few indeed were those who lifted up their thoughts to the gorgeous hills surrounding them, and fewer still those who, glimpsing what lay before them, were moved to admire for even a passing minute. In the flaming woods they visioned only animals and birds to be killed, millstones to be rifted, hardwood to be "mined" into charcoal, hoops to be shaved, and secret

coverts where nameless industry might be carried on in stealth.

But there were two in the Traps who saw. At their doorways in the morning they looked long at the limited sections of the panorama which were visible from their respective abodes, noting the added touches of color laid on during the silent hours of sleep. Through the day, as they traversed the byways on self-imposed missions, they paused often to gaze at some striking bit of natural beauty near at hand or to dwell upon the vistas opening out around them at some higher point. In the twilight they sat somewhere in silent solitude, watching the deepening of the dusk and the shy appearance of the first night stars in the darkening blue. These two were a blond-haired man and a red-haired girl, who lived in little houses on the road leading to the Clove.

Yet, though they looked on the same things, though their souls were lifted up in the same way, though they dwelt not far apart and their minds turned toward each other many a time as the tinted days glided away, they saw nothing of each other. The little bare feet and the sturdy booted feet never turned into the same path. They came and went, they paused and passed on, they traveled open road and faint trail—but never together. Between them stood a wall: a cold, stony, stubborn wall which had suddenly thrust itself up out of the ground as if conjured by the wand of an old-time magician. And on that side of the wall facing the man were graven words spoken by the girl:

"I don't want to walk with you."

On the other side—the side which the girl saw—the wall bore other words: malicious words, evil words, which yet had the ring of truth: words spoken not by the man, but about the man, by others. And beside those words burned a picture which made her writhe and set her teeth into a red lip—a picture of herself held unresisting in that man's arms, beside the plashing Coxing Kill. And atop that wall, leering down at both of them alike, squatted the ugly little demon who has wrecked many a life and will wreck many more: Pride.

But for the presence of that malevolent imp, with his taunting grin and his hissing repetition of the rankling words, either of these two could have walked straight through that wall. But there he perched by day and by night, his claw-like fingers pointing ever downward at the unfading words and picture, his sneering grimace repelling them from taking the first step toward each other. So, instead of moving toward the barrier, each turned from it and traveled along it or away from it—the girl traversing her own chosen paths toward Dickie Barre, the home of Uncle Eb, the upper reaches of Coxing Kill; the man roving along the slopes of Mohonk, sitting for hours on the brink of the Wall, or circling westward around the Clove end of Dickie Barre and onward into the gorge of cascading Peters Kill.

Still, though the little demon drove them to avoid the spots where they were likely to meet, he could not follow them and regulate their varying thoughts and acts. His place was on that barrier, and on it he

stayed. And thus he could not prevent the man from mentally living over at intervals a certain golden hour beside a deep green pool up above, nor keep from that man's eyes a gentle, far-away look when that memory arose to keep him company. Neither could he block the girl from returning repeatedly to that pool with pencil and paper and crude sketching-board, nor close her ears to the farewell words of the man:

"Keep right on doing that—it's worth while—you're doing fine."

So the pair traveled their separate ways. And, traveling, Douglas noted that the new clothing of the hardwood forests was not the only change taking place round about him. Here and there in the woods he met men. And, as subtly as the chill of frosty morning gave way to the warmth of a sunny day, so the first coolness of these men of the Traps now was thawing into an intangible spirit of friendliness. Where previously they had given him a cold stare and curt replies or stony silence when addressed, now their faces relaxed at sight of him, and of their own volition they called: "H'are ye, Hammerless!"

Moreover, when he paused awhile to watch them rounding millstones into shape or cutting cordwood for charcoal, they betrayed no desire to have him move on. On the contrary, they went ahead with their toil as if he were one of their own neighbors, welcome to stay as long as he liked. Sometimes, too, they took a rest and smoked a pipe with him, saying little of their own accord, but answering without hesitation whenever he spoke. And when he moved along

and left them, their "g'by" was as unobtrusively cordial as their greeting.

As the days drifted by and his wandering feet bore him into repeated contact with some of those men, the conversations became still more easy and natural —though never intimate. They talked of their work, and he learned interesting things: that millstone cutters, despite their hardy appearance and muscular development, usually died fairly young because the stone-dust entering the lungs caused tuberculosis; that charcoal-burning meant much exposure to inclement weather and constant vigilance, day and night, lest the vents of the smoking mound become plugged and the whole "mine" explode; that hoop-shaving, the main industry of the region, was steadily falling off because barrel-makers were adopting the "patent" hoops manufactured by mills; that honey-hunting, though productive of a passable revenue to the few whose instincts led them to follow it up, was arduous, uncertain, and often dangerous work because of the roughness of the country, its unexpected pitfalls, and its deadly snakes. And hunting and trapping, though fairly remunerative if one happened to have a lucky season, could hardly be considered a dependable source of income.

These and other things of the same sort he learned in the course of those recurring smoke-talks. He heard, too, the same phrase repeated by different men regarding their different industries—"a dog's life." But he observed also that the men labored faithfully on in that dog's life, and more than once there re-

curred to him Uncle Eb's defense of his neighbors: "Folks is mostly honest round here. Good, hard-workin' fellers."

The old man had spoken truth, it appeared. Though a few worthless drones might exist here and there, though more than one man might carry on surreptitious business "up into the rawcks," the Traps seemed to be inhabited mainly by steady toilers, wringing a primitive living from field and tree and stone and berry-bush. Still, Douglas did not lose sight of the fact that these workers did not compose the entire population. Nor did he fail to observe that the conversation of even those who seemed most friendly was tinged by reticence.

Of their work, of hunting and trapping, of snakes and catamounts and other life, of weather and crops—of these things they would talk freely; but of one another they would say no word. Let a name be mentioned—even that of well-beloved Uncle Eb—and a silence would follow. True, there were two names which brought to their faces expressions as eloquent as words: Snake Sanders and Nat Oaks. At the first their eyes would narrow; at the second, their lips would turn down in contempt. But no comment, good or bad, was spoken of any one. It was borne in on the wanderer that, though civilly received, he still was not considered one of them; and that against all outsiders these hillmen, whatever their private opinions of one another, were a united clan.

In other little ways, too, this was shown. No man ever asked him for tobacco or match. No man ever

quizzed him as to his past, present, or future. No man betrayed friendly anxiety regarding his movements. None offered to sell him milk or eggs, or invited him to visit. Nor, though every one of them looked wistfully now and then at his up-to-date gun, did any one ask to be allowed to examine it—much less to handle it. Between him and them, as between him and Marion, stood an impalpable wall—though not the same wall. This was the barrier of clannish reserve.

It was in this same clannishness, however, that he found the key to their more friendly attitude. Though not much given to analyzing the motives of others, he naturally meditated on the change in their manner; and the solution came in a name which he never mentioned to them and which never was spoken in his hearing—Steve.

Though nothing ever was said about the refugee, he felt that the whole Traps clan knew Steve was here. And, since the thaw in the previous frigidity of the Trapsmen had come about since the afternoon when he had hoisted the desperate youth to the roof and badgered his pursuers into leaving the Wilham place empty-handed, it was not hard to deduce that the hill-dwellers also knew of what he had done that day. If so, they must know that he was neither detective nor criminal; for in the one case he would have worked with the officers, while in the other he would hardly have dared face them down. Therefore they now must regard him as what he actually was: a transient dweller here who had shown himself disposed to stand

with them in protecting their own, but who presently would go back to his own world—and who, consequently, need not be trusted with information concerning any of them.

Very well: he could be as taciturn as any of them. And he was. He gave no information regarding himself, sought none about others—with one exception. And to that one exception the reply also was an exception, for it came readily, with a little grin of understanding.

"Heard anything of a couple of strangers?" was his occasional question. To which came the prompt response: "Hearn they was still round here."

No man ever admitted that he had seen those strangers, or vouchsafed any additional details of what he had "hearn." But with that answer Douglas was content, for it showed that Ward and Bill had not run down their prey. Of Uncle Eb he saw nothing, for he spent little time at his own house and did not visit that of the old man. He felt, however, that the refugee was safely hidden somewhere among the ledges and faithfully fed, that Eb could take care of Eb very well, and that the less he himself knew about either of them at present the better all around.

Of others who had entered his life recently he also saw nothing in his daily rambles. Whatever Snake Sanders and Nigger Nat Oaks might be doing, they seemed to be avoiding his vicinity for the present. Each evening on returning to his haunted house he narrowly inspected both it and its clearing before entering, and afterward he looked into every room before

preparing his night meal. Invariably he found all as he had left it. And when, healthily tired by his miles of tramping, he sought early slumber, even the ghostly Dalton's Death failed to disturb him.

Not that the "ha'nt" was laid. It still walked about overhead, still stole down-stairs on its heels, still rustled the mattress of dead Jake Dalton and moved his bedstead. Perhaps, in the silent watches of the night, it did other things as well. If so, its restlessness meant nothing to the new tenant, who slept the sleep of a tired body and a clear conscience, awaking only at long intervals to hear some unaccountable sound and then, with a drowsy smile, drifting away again into dreamland.

Much of his easy rest, however, may have been due to the fact that he had changed beds. After the "line storm" cleared up he had acted on his decision to move out of reach of that too-convenient front window and door. He had cleaned out the little room where wood was piled, and on its floor he had built up a quieter, more fragrant couch of his own: a foot-thick layer of hemlock and spruce tips gleaned from the trees behind the house. On this real camper's bed he now slept, leaving Dalton's bedstead and noisy mattress just as he had first found them. Each morning before leaving the house, though, he carried his blankets to that front bedroom and tossed them on the corn-husks. Thus, if any one came spying in his absence, the curtainless bedroom window would tell that spy that he habitually slept where he was supposed to sleep. A childishly simple ruse, perhaps, this was.

Yet life or death sometimes hangs on the simplest things.

And so, as has been said, the days brought their lights and shadows, the nights their stars and dreams; and within the ken of Hammerless Hampton nothing at all happened. Yet, unseen, the fingers of Destiny were steadily writing upon the pages of her future-book certain records which no mere mortal now could glimpse or guess.

Then, one lazy afternoon when he happened to be at his bare little home, there recurred to him the tale of Lou Brackett concerning the lost mine of the legendary Ninety-Nine.

"Where the sun first strikes the wall in the morning, there is Ninety-Nine's Mine," ran the saying which the simple-minded woman had confided so mysteriously to him. The "wall," of course, was the cliff-line within the Traps, not the great outer wall. Whimsically he decided to sleep that night upon the eastern heights and see just where the rising sun would strike first. Sunrise on the Traps, viewed from that lofty edge of things, would be a scene well worth a chilly night outdoors.

With a pack of blankets and spare clothing and a little food he started to go. But, with a boyish laugh, he returned to the house. From some old burlap bags and a few sticks of wood he made on Jake Dalton's bed a huddle which, in dim light, would resemble a blanketed form. Then he departed, whistling merrily.

Dusk found him high up on the Wall. At the same hour a form slipped out from the trees backing the

house of Dalton. It peered nervously in at a gloomy window, stole along the side, slipped rapidly to the front stoop, and, with a quick jab, slid a piece of paper under the door. Then it jumped away and ran.

On the paper was written in scrawling characters:

"For gord Sakes dont Sleep hear to Nite."

CHAPTER XVII

A STAB IN THE NIGHT

RAIN drizzled monotonously down on the Traps; cold, raw rain swept slantwise by wind. Along Mohonk and the Great Wall crawled clammy fog, blinding all vision and chilling all flesh within its folds. Through rain and fog feebly penetrated the sickly light of a dismal dawn.

In the dankness and the dimness moved a bedraggled figure laden with a sodden blanket-pack and a dripping shotgun; a man whose blue lips and hollow eyes betokened a gnawing chill and scant sleep. Downward through dripping bushes he meandered uncertainly, avoiding steep slants of smooth rock on which his slippery boot-soles would inevitably precipitate him into disaster, and peering continuously about in search for a thin spot in the creeping cloud-bank. Only the unmistakable slant of the mountainside told him which way he was heading—back into the Traps gulf which he had left on the previous day.

"A gorgeous sunrise—I guess so!" he grumbled. "Mister Jupiter Pluvius, this is a dirty, low-down trick. And Mister Ninety-Nine, you can keep your mine till the crack of doom, for all I care. Go to thunder, both of you! I'm cured."

If the two old-timers whom he addressed were

listening, they must have chortled in malicious mirth—especially the former. Catching this mortal asleep beside a dying fire, the rain-god had called up his soggy servitors in the night and let them wreak their will on the lone man—drowning his fire in the first drenching assault and then battering him right merrily. Without shelter, without light, he had been compelled to huddle up and endure it until dawn; and even now, though he was in motion once more, he had to shut his teeth to keep them from chattering.

From side to side he wormed along his erratic way, swinging from one ghostly bush-clump to another, ever following the rambling line of safe footholds, gradually descending toward the lower edge of the enshrouding mist. After a time the bare rock ended and he came into dense forest where the footing was secure. Down through this he passed with swinging strides. The rain ceased, and the wind died to a breath. Faster and faster he pressed on, warmer now, but eager to reach his house and dry out. Then suddenly he slowed.

Dead ahead opened a cleared space, and beyond, vague in the gray-white blur, were the faint outlines of a rough shack. Scanning the place as he moved on, he became sure that it was one which he had not seen in his previous wanderings. The exterior of the house was decidedly uninviting, but from its lopsided chimney smoke was drifting thinly away into the fog. His stride lengthened again. Since the inhabitants of this house were up, he would stop there and ask for some hot coffee.

But the quick decision was as quickly reversed. As he neared the door it stealthily opened. Out stole Lou Brackett.

"Morning," he sang out, speeding up again. "Lovely day."

She started, turned her head, looked behind, advanced with hand uplifted for silence. He paused.

"Don't talk so loud," she implored as she reached him. "Snake, he's a-sleepin', but ye might waken him up. What ye want round here?"

"Nothing. Just going home. Been up above and got wet." Smiling a little, he added: "I wanted to see where the sun hit the wall first in the morning, but it isn't hitting to-day."

Into the black eyes came a sudden light. She laid a plump, not over-clean hand on his wet shoulder.

"Ye're a-huntin' the mine! I bet ye'll find it, too, if ye jest keep a-lookin' long 'nough. Ye ain't got nawthin' else to do—keep a-huntin'! An' when ye git to it 'member ye promised me some o' the silver. Will ye? An' don't tell nobody. Jest me an' you—we can git outen here together then."

The broad hint brought a tart retort to his tongue, but he swallowed it. Instead he asked: "So you still want to leave? Why don't you go, then?"

She stared as if he had lost his senses.

"Go wher'? Go how? I ain't got no folks, mister—I ain't got no place to go—I ain't got no money—I ain't got nawthin'. I ain't never been nowheres—wha'd I do outside o' the Traps? An' Snake, he'd kill me sure's shootin', he would. 'Course, if I had some silver

or somethin'—but I ain't got none. 'Less'n ye want to take me out with ye ——"

"No, I don't," he broke in bluntly. "But you can get work in plenty of places outside where he never would bother you."

"I can't!" she disputed, drawing back. "Them that's borned into the Traps lives into the Traps an' dies into the Traps. Ther' ain't no place for us outside."

"All right. That doesn't match very well with what you said about leaving, but never mind. How did you and Snake make out that day about—er—the bridge?"

A slow smile spread across her face, revealing anew the gap in her teeth.

"Oh, we got 'long all right—I done what ye told me. He'd hearn 'bout it, but when he come at me I cracked him good with the sadiron an' jumped onto him 'bout them Oakses. It kinder took the tuck outen him. But"—her smile faded and her face turned hard—"that red-head o' Nat's better leave my man 'lone! Fust thing she knows I'll—wal, she better look out, tha's all!"

"What's that? Why, you're crazy! She hates the sight of him. Don't you start any trouble with her, or you'll be mighty sorry. And what's more, you can tell your man that unless he lets her alone he'll run into something hard—the same thing that hit him on Dickie Barre awhile ago. She belongs to ——"

The next word on his tongue was "Steve," with more words to follow. But his habitual avoidance of that name suddenly stopped his speech. She grinned

sneeringly, interpreting his abrupt silence according to her lights.

"She does, hey? Then ye better take her into yer own house an' watch her. Me an' Snake don't git 'long none too well, but no red-headed catamount like her is a-goin' to git him. He was down ther' last night late, I know he was—he never tells me nawthin', but I ain't simple, an' I know. He come back 'way 'long late, an' he hadn't been a-drinkin', an' if he ain't drinkin' to Oaks's what's he a-doin' ther'? He's ——"

All at once she turned hurriedly, as if sensing something in the house behind her. When she faced back she looked perturbed.

"I got to git in. He might waken up any time. G'by."

"All right. But you mind what I told you!"

Without reply, she padded hastily doorward. Frowning, he pushed away down-hill. The door opened and softly closed, and the woman was gone. The mist sifted around the man, and he too was gone. And neither of them knew that Sanders, sleeping with one ear open, had started up at the sound of the intruder's first careless greeting and since then had watched snakily from the interior gloom.

He had heard nothing of what was said, for he was in his bedroom, behind a shut door and a closed window; and he had preferred to remain there, using his eyes rather than his ears, making no move. Furthermore, something about the appearance of that man in the ghostly fog had seemed to paralyze him for a mo-

ment when he first looked out. Then, recovering himself, he had watched the colloquy with the eyes of evil, interpreting it with the brain of evil. And now, though again in bed and to all appearances asleep when the woman Lou stealthily peeped in at him, he was mentally gliding along a black, black path—like a copperhead slithering through a sunless morass wherein moved nameless things.

Onward down the slope marched Douglas, scowling ahead at a well-marked path which his feet now were following but which his mind hardly noticed. The half-spoken threat of the woman behind against Marion Oaks bothered him. Primitive, ignorant, unmoral, willing to abandon her "man" for a better one but jealous of any other woman who might attract him—there was no knowing what she might do in some vindictive rage. Douglas was not one of those men who look on all women as children and scoff at their dangerous moods; his newspaper experience had repeatedly brought him into contact with stark tragedies resulting from feminine jealousy; and he recalled the Indian cheek-bones of Lou. Marion, he felt, should be warned.

But he shrank from the thought of delivering that warning himself. Not only was the rôle of tale-bearer utterly repugnant to him, but that wall of Pride loomed high and hard, as before. Moreover, the girl had repeatedly shown that she wished her acquaintance with him to remain unknown, had commanded him to remain away from Nigger Nat's house. What, then, should he do?

The problem solved itself. The mist thinned, then lifted a little, and he found himself nearing the road, only a short distance above the Oaks place. And when, striding along the road itself, he approached the house of Nigger Nat, he saw both Marion and her "mom" outside the door, apparently looking around for some one. To his astonishment, Eliza Oaks hailed him.

"Say! See anythin' o' my man anywheres?"

"Why, no. Lost him?" He turned into the yard.

"I dunno. Ye didn't see him up the road nowheres?"

"Nope. But I haven't been up the road very far. Just came down across-lots."

Her gaze went over him, taking in his thorough wetness and the soggy blanket-pack. His eyes turned to the girl, who had drawn back a little and was steadfastly watching him. Over her thin dress she was wearing a ragged old coat, evidently the property of her father; and down the shoulders of the threadbare garment, unconfined by the few pins which generally held it up on her head, her hair cascaded in rippling glory. Meeting his eyes, her own contracted a little; but they held, unwavering. As swiftly as he had decided what to do for Steve that day at Uncle Eb's, he determined what to do for her.

"Am I correct in assuming that this is Miss Marion Oaks?" he asked formally, with the tiniest droop of the off eyelid.

"You are," she answered with a cold dignity matching his own. "What of it?"

A subdued gurgle from the older woman drew his gaze to her. On her shrewish lips he found a sour smile.

"Ye needn't to be so awful perlite," she drawled. "Marry told me 'bout what ye done to that 'ere catamount, an' how ye made them fellers leave her 'lone onto the road, an' 'bout—wal, we're 'bliged to ye."

"Good! Glad you know we've met before, I mean—there's no obligation. Er—how does Nat feel about it?"

A scowl wiped off the thin smile. After a moment of silence she answered guardedly: "He dunno nawthin' 'bout it."

"I see. You don't tell him all you know. Good idea, maybe. He's still sore at me, then. All right. Just keep him away from me and we won't have any trouble. I'm sorry I had to shoot up those dogs of yours, but ——"

"Oh, 't's all right. I was mad then, but we're better off 'thout 'em—they et more'n they was wuth. An' mebbe ye done right to crack Nat when he come for ye. He don't mean no harm, Nat don't, but he—he's kind o' funny—he gits spells when he ain't his own self, like." She looked worriedly around again. "I wisht I knowed what's 'come o' him. He ain't been to home all night."

Douglas eyed her, remembering what Lou had said—that Snake had been here until late last night. But then, feeling that the jealous woman might have been utterly mistaken in her statement, he kept his thought

to himself. As for Nat, he probably was drunk somewhere. He turned to Marion.

"Miss Marion, I've heard something which I think you ought to know," he plunged. "Er—well, a certain woman up yonder thinks you and Snake Sanders are too friendly to suit her. It's absurd, of course, but still—folks get queer ideas, and sometimes they do queer things, and—maybe you'd better—er—keep your eyes open ——"

He floundered to a stop, reddening under the steady gray gaze, in which he read mounting scorn. Humiliated already by his position, he squirmed at her drawling answer.

"So that's where you've been to. Ain't Snake to home yet? You're takin' big chances, seems like. But that ain't anything to me. You needn't worry for me, Mister Hampton—I can take pretty good care of my own self. But you can tell your friend, when you see her the next time, if she'll jest bust Snake's head so he won't never come to, I'll be much 'bliged."

Before he could retort, her mother's voice broke in.

"That 'ere Lou's a bigger fool 'n Snake, 'n' he's crazy 'nough. I ast him only yestiddy, says I, 'Ye mizzable idjit, how d'ye think ye'd ever git Marry when ye got Lou already? I've told ye time an' time to keep outen here ——'"

She checked herself suddenly, as if regretting her outburst. The blond man's eyes were on hers again, boring like gimlets.

"So Snake was here last night," he said. "And where was Nat?"

"Nat—he was here—it warn't last night—'twas in the aft'noon. Then they went away, an' Nat ain't back. I wisht I knowed ——"

Once more she looked up and down the road.

"Snake's at home," he told her. "At least I was told he was, when I came by his place just now. Maybe Nat's there with him. I don't know. Well, good-day."

Without another look at the girl he swung about. At his first step, however, Marion stopped him.

"Wait a minute," she said. As he glanced at her he found another change in her attitude. She still stood with unconscious dignity, but the smouldering scorn had died from her eyes, and her face had softened.

"I want to say thank you for what you done that day onto the road—makin' that detective feller let go of me; and, more'n that, for helpin' out—you know who—up to Uncle Eb's. And you meant all right by tellin' me jest now to look out, I shouldn't wonder. So I say thank you for that too. G'by."

With that she was gone into the house. He opened his mouth, shut it, glanced at Eliza Oaks, saw a faint smile in her face, and laughed shortly. With a wave of his free hand he started off again, and kept going.

"What a wayward, fiery little thoroughbred!" he thought. "Quick as a cat—now you see her mind and now you don't. She made one awful fool of you, Hamp. Serves you right, too, confound you, with your tattling! But she thanked you, at that, like the real little lady she is. If she only had a chance to be

somebody—if it weren't for the black blood—and Steve —— Lordy, what a woman she'd make!"

The thought kept revolving in his mind until he entered the fallow little field beside his bleak abode. Then it fled.

His front door was open.

Instinctively he slowed. His searching scrutiny revealed no other change in the house. Only that door, which he had made to fit tightly by tacking on strips, stood as if shoved back by a hurried entrance—or departure.

"Wind?" he debated. "Wind blew last night, but not hard. H'm! How come?"

Approaching guardedly, he peered within. Nobody was there. Nothing seemed altered. The place not only looked empty—it felt empty.

But before stepping over the threshold he shoved the door hard with one foot. It swung back and struck the wall, proving that nothing waited behind it. Entering, he shot a glance into the bedroom where lay the forgotten dummy of burlap. For a second he stood rigid. Then he leaped into the room.

The dummy still lay there. But it had been visited in the night. The visitor had left a memento of his call. Its handle jutted horizontally from the huddled sacks.

Douglas grasped that handle and drew upward. From the burlap and the corn-husk mattress beneath slid a long blade. Grimly he inspected it. When he turned toward the outer room his face was flint.

He had seen that murderous tool before. It was the corn-hook of Nigger Nat Oaks.

CHAPTER XVIII

HUNTERS OF MEN

MOVING rapidly about, Douglas inspected his real bedroom and the spidery attic, finding his bough-tip couch undisturbed and the upper room empty. Back in the main room, he glowered anew at the bayonet-like blade which had been driven with such venomous force into what seemed to be a sleeping man.

"This cooks your goose, Nat Oaks!" he growled. "You've let yourself in for the worst mauling you ever got in your low-down life. Just as soon as you and I meet up again—and we'll meet just as quick as I can find you!"

He strode to the door. But there he slowed, stayed by the reflection that Nigger Nat was not likely to be at home now and that he did not know where else to look. "Better build a fire, eat, and dry out," whispered Common Sense. So he slammed the door shut and returned to the cold stove.

With the kindlings in position, he reached to the little shelf above him for a dry match—and knocked the match-box to the floor. Stooping to pick up the little igniters, he saw under the stove a scrap of paper. Mechanically he lifted it, glanced at it, saw only a blank space; folded it once, touched a match to it, and held it under the grate to start the fire. It blazed out bravely, the light of its own flame shining through it.

Suddenly he snatched it back and killed its blaze

under a wet sole. The light had revealed writing inside the little sheet.

Straightening out the charred, muddy remnant, he read:

"—akes dont Sleep hear to Nite."

Minutes passed while he squatted there, his whole mind concentrated on that belated message. Then he turned, inspected the floor, looked back at the stove, and nodded.

"Somebody slid this under the door yesterday after I left," he deduced. "When the door opened later on, the wind blew it here, wrong side up. Now who left it? Not Lou Brackett—not Marry or her mother—they don't know a thing about this. Uncle Eb? Steve? Not likely that they'd know what was to happen. And it surely wasn't either of those man-hunters. H'm! Some one of these silent Trapsmen who likes me, maybe. Well, my unknown friend, I'm obliged to you. Call again some time."

Again he studied the writing, the spelling, the paper—cheap wrapping, wrinkled and soiled.

"You haven't much education and you write like a coal-heaver, but your heart's true blue," he added, folding the blackened tatter and pocketing it. "I'd surely like to know who you are. But if you're as close-mouthed as everybody else around here you'd never admit that you wrote this, anyway. Well, let's start this fire."

Soon a hot fire was roaring up-chimney, coffee was coming to a boil, and he was arraying himself in the few dry articles of clothing he could find, while the

wet garments and boots encircled the stove. After a rough-and-ready breakfast he hugged the stove himself, smoking and thinking.

Nat Oaks was a clumsy murderer indeed to leave his weapon behind. Perhaps the ha'nt had scared him —the open door indicated a sudden bolt from the place. For that matter, it was strange that he had ever dared to enter this house of fear at night. He must have been full of "Dutch courage" at the time.

But there was Snake Sanders, too. Snake had been with Nat when he left home yesterday afternoon. He had returned to his own den late at night. And he was a creature who always worked stealthily, snakily, using others as his tools. In avenging his real or fancied grudge against the Bumps he had used Steve as his scapegoat. In trying to rid the neighborhood of the "detective" and gain possession of the stranger's belongings he had employed a deadly reptile. Now he and Nigger Nat had been much together of late— and he had "some kind of a hold" on Nat. So Marion had said. It was fair to suspect, then, that he had been the instigator of this murderous attempt last night. Yes, very fair. Almost a foregone conclusion.

Yet there was no actual proof of Snake's hand in this. For that matter, the proof against Nat himself was purely circumstantial. Another hand might have wielded this corn-hook. It was even possible that the corn-hook itself was not Nat's, though it looked the same. Corn-hooks probably were much alike. True, this one had a whitish gouge on the handle near the blade, and the same sort of mark had been noticeable

at the same spot when Nat had poised it for attack that day in his yard. But still ——

"First thing I'll do, Nigger Nat, will be to find out whether this hook is yours," declared the man by the stove. "If it is, the next thing is to get hold of you. Then I'll hammer the truth out of you."

In pursuance of this program, he stoked up the fire and hastened the drying of the necessary articles of outdoor gear. When at length his personal outfit was again serviceable he went forth into the raw day.

But he did not start away at once. Memory persisted in reminding him of Uncle Eb's account of the open door and of what he had found in the woods behind the house. He rubbed his chin, then turned and stalked toward those woods.

In under the funereal trees he passed, scrutinizing the vague dark things here and there among the trunks, finding them to be only rotting fragments of old logs, half-buried juts of stone, or lumps of forest mould. No sound came to him but the tiny impacts of falling leaves and the watery squash of his own boots on the soaked soil. Dreary and dismal stood the forest, telling him nothing of what had taken place last night. His only reward for his wandering there was a renewal of his wetness.

Swinging back, he worked by the driest route toward the road, thinking only of settling the matter of the ownership of the corn-hook. And now that he sought nothing, he found something: a grim reminder of what had come about within these shades on another night.

Under a hemlock was a sinister low mound. At one end stood a short pine board. On the board he deciphered scrawling letters shallowly cut with a jackknife.

JAKE
DALTON

Though he had repeatedly visited these woods before, seeking fuel, he never had stumbled on this spot. Now he stood gazing thoughtfully down, hearing again Uncle Eb's words:

"What he was runnin' away from—what had got holt of him before he run—nobody knows. Nobody but Jake, an' he can't tell."

And last night another man had bolted from the same house, from the same room—whither?—why? Douglas felt a slight chill. With a sharp shake of the shoulders he lifted his head and right-faced. Out to the silent clearing he tramped, and straight up the road.

On his way to the Oaks place he met nobody. The only tracks not blurred by rain on the sand were his own, made that morning. Entering the yard of Nigger Nat, he slowed down, sharply scanning the windows. No face showed there.

"Hey! Hullo!" he called.

After a pause the door opened. Marion's head came out.

"Hullo yourself! What you want? Seen pop anywheres?"

"No. He hasn't come home yet?"

"If he had I wouldn't be askin', would I?"

"Probably not. Well, I wonder if I can borrow his corn-hook awhile."

"Corn-hook? Why—yes, I guess so. He wouldn't like it much, but—— Mom, Mister Hampton wants pop's corn-hook awhile. All right? Wait a minute and I'll git it."

She withdrew, leaving the door partly open. Presently her voice floated to him from somewhere at the rear.

"'Tain't here! Mom, you been usin' it? Well, 'tain't here. What's 'come of it, I wonder?"

Hammerless Hampton's face tightened. To the door he passed, drawing from under his coat the tool which, despite its clumsiness, he had managed to conceal.

"Maybe this is it," he called. Feet padded inside, and both the girl and her mother appeared.

"Sakes alive! That's it, now!" ejaculated the woman. "It's hisn—got the two nicks into the edge that he never ground outen it, an' there's the place where one o' the dawgs bit onto it." She pointed to dull dents on the handle. "How come ye by it?" she added suspiciously. "What ye askin' for it for, when ye got it already?"

"Just wanted to make sure it was his. I found it down the road a piece—in some corn-husks." He watched her keenly. Her visage showed only blank wonderment. The girl, too, looked mystified, but she was probing his grim face with sharp eyes.

"An'—ye didn't see nawthin' o' Nat?"

"Not a thing. But you can tell him, when he gets

home, that I want to see him, and the best thing he can do is to wait for me."

Without another word or look he swung away, leaving them staring after him in misgiving. On up the road he journeyed, turning off at the path leading to the lair of Snake Sanders.

The crawling mists had long since left the slopes, and when he emerged again into the Sanders field the shack was visible in all its raw nakedness. Smoke still curled from its shiftless chimney, but the only sign of life outside was a lonesome speckled hen pecking disconsolately at the bare dirt. Watching the windows, he marched up to the door and gave it a resounding kick. Then he jumped to one side.

A chair fell over within, followed by hurried steps.

"Who's ther' ?" shrilled a sharp voice.

"Open up!" he snapped, warily sweeping the front of the place, from corner to corner. "I want Snake!"

More steps. The door swung slowly back. Lou Brackett's face appeared, drawn into a squinting knot.

"Send Snake out here!" he commanded.

She eyed him, unspeaking, for a long minute. Gradually her face relaxed. She came forward and stood on the door-stone. Her right hand was gripping a heavy flatiron.

"Snake, he ain't here."

"Where is he? I want him."

"I dunno wher' he's at. He went out 'while ago—never said one word to me after he got up, 'cept tellin' me to git more cawffee. What's pesterin' ye? Wha' for d'ye come a-kickin' into the door ——"

"Nat Oaks here?"

"Nat! No, mister, that yeller dawg ain't! Him nor none o' his tribe—now or no other time! What ye ——"

"All right. Good-bye."

Leaving her open-mouthed, he circuited the house, looking in at every window, finding that she spoke truthfully: neither Sanders nor Oaks was there. She still stood on the steps, gaping after him, when he went back across the opening and disappeared downhill among the trees.

At the edge of the sandy road below, he paused, undecided what to do next. Had he been in almost any other place and seeking a man, he would have visited other men and asked questions. But here in the tight-mouthed Traps, what was the use? Still, he felt a strong distaste for returning and idling out the dismal day in his dreary abode. Half consciously he turned toward Uncle Eb's home.

"I'll go up and smoke a pipe with the old man, anyhow," he decided aloud.

"Smoke it here if you want," a voice answered.

The voice came from beside a tree not ten feet away. Startled, he looked into the face of Ward, man-hunter.

"Caught you flat-footed, huh?" Ward went on. "Bill's behind you, if that's what you're lookin' for."

True enough, a few feet back from the other side of the path, the morose face of Bill showed beside another tree.

"Well! You fellows are getting good!" Douglas

congratulated them. "Regular Indian stuff. You'd have had me cold if you'd wanted me."

"Sure." Ward nodded carelessly. "But we don't want you—not yet."

"Not yet? Meaning what?'

"Oh, we ain't got anything on you—yet. When we do we'll nail you. Right now we got other work."

"Thanks! Mighty nice of you to tell me. How are you making out?"

"Bum luck, so far," was the frank admission. "But we'll git what we're after. You could help us if you would, but it's no good askin' you."

Douglas grinned jauntily. Then he grew sober. There was something about the patient, straightforward, quiet-spoken Ward that appealed strongly to him, just as there was a coarseness about "Brooklyn Bill" that aroused his reckless antagonism. Too, he himself was now a man-hunter on his own account. With Bill silent behind him and Ward's steady eyes before him, he felt a sudden swerve from the Traps current in which he had been drifting. Weighing his words, he spoke out.

"See here, Ward. You haven't told me who your man is, and I'm not asking. Maybe I know something about the case, maybe I don't. But let's suppose a case.

"Suppose you're looking for a fellow—only a young lad—who got sent up for arson and a few other things like that. Suppose I have reason to believe that the young fellow never did what he was sent up for; that he has served years for a crime he never committed;

that he was 'framed.' Would you blame me for not wanting to help send him back to a good many more years of the same?"

Ward's eyes widened a trifle.

"No, I wouldn't. I'd feel sorry for him myself. But 'framed'? How?"

"Used as a goat by an older man. Filled up with liquor and left to take the blame for burning a house and shooting people, while the man who really did it sneaked back up here and laughed at you fellows. That could easily be done."

A pause, while Ward watched him steadily.

"Sure, it could be done. But to git the kid clear it would have to be proved. Who's the man?"

Douglas glanced behind him—up Snake Sanders' road. The movement was involuntary, prompted by an instinct to make sure that nobody else was lurking and listening. But Ward's shrewd eyes narrowed, and he nodded as if in complete understanding.

"I'm not saying," Douglas replied, facing him again. "We're just supposing, of course. But in that case, you couldn't expect much help from me, even if I knew where the youngster was. As a matter of fact—if you are looking for such a fellow—I don't know where he is. But, speaking of goats, here's something that's not 'supposing' at all: While I was away last night somebody entered my house and rammed a foot and a half of cold steel into a dummy I'd left in my bed. And I'm pretty sure that the mind back of that stab—though maybe not the hand that did the stab-

bing—was the same one that framed up that 'supposed' boy we're talking about."

Another pause.

"Uh-huh. And you've been up here to see about it, and your man wasn't home. Well, we're waitin' for that same gentleman; been wantin' to see him for quite awhile, but he's a slippery cuss. When we do git hold of him—we've got a few questions to ask him. Glad you spoke that little piece of yours, Hampton. We'll keep it in mind."

"All right. If I see him before you do he may get mussed up considerably, so you'd better grab him soon. So long."

"Wait a minute. Got any idea who swung that steel on the dummy—if it wasn't the same gent?"

"Oh, yes. But that's my business. So long."

"So long. Watch yourself."

Douglas tramped away. Ward and Bill looked at each other, slid back behind their trees, and resumed their silent waiting.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SUN BREAKS THROUGH

THREE days of raw chill, leaden cloud, and numbing wind rolled past. No more rain fell, but, except by fitful gleams, no sun shone. Through each gray day the dying leaves fluttered limply down, carpeting the damp ground thicker and thicker with yellow and crimson and brown. Through each black night a few hardy survivors of the former myriad of katydids quacked despairingly, and here and there a cricket sounded a mournful call to comrades which no longer answered him. Bleak November was drawing near.

In those gray days Hammerless Hampton ranged the roads, the fields, and the forest, implacably hunting the man or men who had struck in the dark at the lay figure representing himself. Time and again he visited the Oaks house and the Sanders shack. But never did he find his quarry there. Time and again he was asked, with suspicion verging on anger, why he kept "a-pesterin' round." But he never told.

The manner of both Nigger Nat's woman and Snake Sanders' woman became sullenly hostile. Yet, though their attitude toward him was basically the same, there was a difference. In the shrewish face and the snappish answers of the former was revealed worriment

for the missing man. In the lowering countenance and the dogged replies of the latter was clumsy untruth. The man who studied them both knew that Snake, though always absent when he came, was present at certain other times; while Nat had never come home.

Of Marion he saw little. When he did see her it was at her own door, and few words passed between them. He knew, though, that her active brain was surmising more or less accurately why he was hunting her father, and in her sober face he saw grave concern. But the rankling irritation of the other two women was never visible in her voice or manner. Whether her sympathies were with him or with her own kin he did not know.

He did not confine his questioning, however, to these three. Though he felt it to be useless—and, indeed, found it so—to ask any of the clansmen for information regarding the two whom he sought, he quizzed every man he met. The only result was to cause keen interest in his movements and to spread throughout the mountain bowl the word that he was "a-huntin' Nat an' Snake with blood into his eye."

Even Uncle Eb gave him no aid. But this time it was not clannishness nor habitual taciturnity regarding his neighbors that made fruitless the younger man's call on him. He really knew nothing of either of the rascally pair.

"Nor I don't want to," he added bluntly. "If ther's anybody into the world I don't want to know nawthin' 'bout, it's them fellers. No, I take that back,

now I think onto it. Ther's one thing I'd like awful well to know 'bout 'em—that they was both dead. But that's too good to come true."

The old man was standing in his doorway at the time, and his manner was even more jerky than usual. Douglas, outside, was conscious of the frank scrutiny of two women at a near-by window—Uncle Eb's wife and spinster daughter, both intelligent-looking but decidedly plain of feature. Uncle Eb, too, seemed aware of listening ears, for he left his stoop and walked to the road, out of hearing. He asked no question, but his move was an obvious invitation to tell why Nat and Snake were wanted. And, briefly, Douglas did.

"The varmints!" Eb muttered fiercely. "The murderin' snakes! They'd oughter be shot! Only for ye bein' away they'd got ye. They're a-layin' low now 'cause they know ye're a-trackin' 'em. By mighty, boy, ye must have a good angel a-watchin' out for ye, sendin' ye out that day an' all! Ye'd oughter change yer bed now—mebbe change yer house too. I ain't soop'stitious, but ther' ain't no good luck into that house o' Jake's."

Douglas wavered, half minded to tell him of his previous change in sleeping quarters and of the mysterious missive of warning. But he held his tongue. Such disclosures would do no good. Instead, he shifted the subject.

"Maybe so, but I'm not moving out yet. By the way, I saw those two detectives the other day. They say they'll get what they're after."

Uncle Eb scowled. After a glance around he whispered:

"Son, I'm right worried. This is turrible weather for that boy to lay up into the rocks. He ain't tough now—he was into the pen three year, ye know, an' that weakens a feller—specially us hill fellers that's used to lots o' air. I dasn't bring him back down here—I dasn't go nigh him—for fear them detectives'll git to him; they been round here two-three times, a-watchin' an' a-layin' low. But I wisht he could git under cover some'rs. I hear he's got a misery onto his chest already."

The younger man frowned in concern. Comfortably clad though he was, he felt the raw bite of the air; his ungloved fingers, in fact, were partly numbed. And Steve, cowering among those clammy bowlders, unable to risk a fire—why, the boy was barefoot!

"D'ye s'pose, now, ye could toll them fellers out o' the Traps for good?" Eb suggested hopefully. "Ye fooled 'em deef, dumb an' blind that time they was right onto his back. Mebbe ye could ——"

He paused. Douglas reluctantly shook his head.

"Afraid not. They know now that I'm on Steve's side. It wouldn't work. But—I'll see if I can think of something."

Dubious as the answer was, Eb's face showed some relief.

"Do that, son! Think o' sumpthin'—anythin'—an' then go do it. I been a-thinkin' till I'm all jumpy like, an' it don't git me nowheres. Mebbe I'd oughter let him shift for himself, seein' he ain't no relation o'

mine, but I can't keep my mind offen the boy. He was borned unlucky, ye might say, an' he never had much of a chance, an'—I'm right sorry for him."

"Born unlucky? How do you mean?"

Uncle Eb glanced sidewise at him; pulled at one end of his walrus mustache; spat loudly, looked at his windows, and spoke—but did not answer.

"I got to be gittin' in. I'm a-gittin' cold. Uh—do what ye can for the pore feller. G'by."

Hastily he lumbered houseward. Douglas stared, laughed shortly at the awkward rebuff, and sauntered away, unoffended. He knew the old man's tongue had been clutched by the hand of habit—the habit of telling no tales about others; and, in a way, he honored the old fellow for it. What mattered Steve's birth, anyway? The real crux was the problem of his immediate future.

All the way back to his abiding-place that problem bothered him. Night was not far off now, and the cold was increasing. Looking up at the chill gray cliffs of Dickie Barre as he passed along the road, he shivered. What a cheerless refuge for a half-clad boy! Skulking there alone in a black hole night after night, numbly waiting day after day, subsisting on cold food smuggled to him by stealth, dreading every sound, with a growing "misery onto his chest"—he was in a worse prison than the one from which he had escaped. Beside him, its grisly fingers perhaps already touching his lungs, lurked the dread spectre of the hills—Pneumonia. And he, Hampton, though he lived in a haunted house, had shelter and stove and warmth

—and more room than he needed. All at once he nodded sharply. He knew what he would do.

Before night set in he worked a little while at his back door, which opened hard and creaked loudly. With his camp-ax he trimmed its edges, and with gun-oil he lubricated the rusty hinges, until it could swing easily and silently. After barring it he turned to the window of his sleeping-room, which hitherto had been wedged so that it would admit fresh air but nothing else. On this also he labored for a time. When it would rise with smooth speed he locked it with a short stake and turned his attention to preparing supper.

"Maybe to-morrow night we'll have company," he informed the emptiness. "Maybe."

An hour later he was asleep on his aromatic couch, and the whole house was given up to darkness and silence.

As the black hours wore on, the boards above his head dully gave notice that the ha'nt was prowling back and forth on its softly thumping bare heels. Perhaps his subconscious self knew of the movement, but it did not arouse his sleeping senses—it was only the usual nightly occurrence. Out in the main room beyond his closed door, too, something moved about: a silent, hideous, unhuman thing which paused awhile beside the wooden barrier, then glided elsewhere; a thing which opened no doors or windows, which neither entered the house nor left it, but which presently was gone. Of this, too, he knew nothing. The weird sough of the sepulchral pines behind the house, the proximity of the mound holding all that was left

of the man who had been done to death here, the steel-slashed rent in the corn-husk mattress beyond the wall —none of these things troubled him. Tranquilly he slept until morning light smote softly on his lids and woke him to a new day.

Sun and warmth flooded the Traps when, after breakfast, he emerged into the open. After the grayness and the numbness of the past few days, the change was magical. But for the thinly clad branches above and the sodden wind-blown leaves below, it would have seemed mid-August instead of late October. In the hot air flies buzzed, bees hummed, and a resounding chorus throbbed from crickets and katydids defiantly informing the world that they were not yet dead. And from all sides drifted the damp fragrance of forest mould and of grass-ground drying in the heat.

But, as a wandering breeze floated from the region of a bush-bound little brook beyond the road, it bore into the pleasant aroma of plant life a vague taint.

Douglas, inhaling the freshness of the morning, half sensed that slight odor and glanced around. But then the breeze died and he forgot it. Drawing another great lungful of air, he struck off up the road toward the Oaks place.

Before he reached it the sound of chopping came to him. As he entered the yard he found a figure slugging away at a chopping-block with an ax which seemed dull. It wore a man's hat, but it also wore a dress. The hat fell off as he approached, and the sun glowed red in the tumbled hair suddenly revealed.

At the sound of his step the girl wheeled sharply and, panting and flushed, looked at him.

"No, he ain't home," she said before he could speak. "You can run right 'long up to Lou's."

She turned from him, picked up another stick of fire-wood, swung the ax dexterously, and split the fagot clean. Something about her words and manner gave him a sudden glimpse of her side of that pride-wall which had stood between them: the side which he had supposed to bear the face of Steve, but which now seemed to hold something else. He stepped forward and closed one hand over the ax-helve.

"Look here, Marion," he said quietly, "I don't like that."

"'Tain't much to me what you like," she retorted, though with little heat. "Jest travel 'long."

"When I'm ready." He kept his grip on the handle. "But let's settle this now. You've been acting offish for quite awhile—ever since the day we talked about art and—and so on, up the brook. I've been too bull-headed to ask you why. But I'm asking you now, straight and square; and asking you, too, why you keep intimating that Lou is a particular friend of mine. Now speak up, man to man."

With steady directness she looked up at him. Wide gray eye and clear blue eye searched each other to the depths. And then, man to man, straight from the shoulder, she spoke out.

"I heard 'bout you huggin' her under the bridge. 'Tain't any of my business, only ——"

"What's that? *Hugging?*"

"Yes, sir, huggin'. And pretty hard, too. And that wasn't much more'n an hour after—after"—she flushed crimson—"after you—made me—fight to git my picture. The only difference it makes to me is this: you couldn't have much respect for yourself to do it, or for me either. 'Course, I'm only Nigger Nat's girl, and folks ain't got much respect for him or anybody of his, but—but that's different."

"I should think so!" he agreed crisply. "Those dirty little gossips who spied us made a fine tale of it, didn't they! Well, now, here's the exact truth."

And the exact truth of that incident he gave her. He omitted only to tell of the woman's clumsy attempt to lure him and of her appeal for silver from the lost mine; and these parts he left out only because of innate chivalry toward even such drab womanhood as Lou's.

"So that's all there is to it," he concluded. "I tried to help her out but only got her into a worse mess, thanks to lying tongues. Now you can believe me or those kids, just as you like."

A little longer the gray eyes held his. Then they fell, and on her lips dawned the first smile he had seen there in many a long day.

"I'm—I'm glad you come visitin' this mornin', even if you are mad at my pop," she said softly. "But have we both got to keep holdin' this ax?"

"No," he smiled. "I can hold it alone. Let go." She obeyed.

"Now I didn't come hunting your pop to-day," he went on, "although I'm on the lookout for him all the

time, and —— Tell me, do you care much about your pop?"

"Well, he's the onliest pop I've got," she naively reminded him. "But I don't care much about him. He's awful ornery."

"Quite right. He's all of that. But we'll forget him for now. I came over to-day to ask you to take me to—a friend of ours." She looked up quickly. "Uncle Eb tells me he's sick, and I want to see him. Will you guide me?"

Dubiously she looked all about. Her whispered reply was hardly audible.

"We've got to go careful. The detective fellers, they're a-watchin' all round—mebbe they're up into some of these trees right now. But—can you help him some way?"

"I'm going to try."

"All right, we'll go. Cut me a little more wood while I take this into the house. Mom, she's abed yet; she don't feel good this mornin'. But she ain't real sick. We'll go pretty quick."

With another smile at him she gathered up wood and hastened in. And Hammerless Hampton set his gun against the wall and looked around, marveling at the brightness of the sun and the sweetness of the air and the cheeriness of the birds. Even the harsh cries of the bluejays in the woods sounded musical. In all the Traps at that moment he could perceive not one discordant note of sound or color. Indeed, something disagreeable seemed magically to have vanished from the world, and it was good to be alive.

And something had vanished: something nebulous, intangible, yet real and rock-hard: the two-sided wall of Pride. And Douglas, feeling that all was well with the universe, began lustily swinging the ax in the service of the girl who was glad he had come visiting.

CHAPTER XX

LIBERTY OR DEATH

ALONG a dim, winding trail, through baffling undergrowth and around half-buried blocks of stone and over prostrate tree-trunks, a man and a maid passed in silence. Under foot the damp leaves, not yet dried by sun or wind, gave out no betraying crackle. The pair spoke no word, made hardly a rustle as they touched bare stems or twigs. They seemed bound on an all-day hunting trip, for the man carried a shotgun, and the girl a little apron knotted into a bag, containing food. Yet it was the girl who led the way.

Upward, ever upward they climbed on a slope whose pitch grew more and more steep. At length they paused at the edge of a gigantic mass of bowlders, above which towered stark crags split by a yard-wide fissure.

"We go up into that crack, then 'long the top of the ledge to the left, then down again," Marion breathed.

"Why?" he remonstrated. "Why not work along here without going up and down?"

"You ain't much of a detective if you can't guess that," she laughed. "Up on top we can watch back and see if we're followed. Down here we can't."

"Quite right," he conceded. "You're a better dodger than I am. A better climber, too, probably. These boots don't grip bare rock very well."

"Go 'long, and go slow. Don't bump and scrape. We've got all day."

After surveying the jumble above, he began working up into it, moving with caution but with creditable speed. For a time he was so engrossed with the toil of quietly moving himself, his damp-soled boots, and his gun, that he gave no attention to her. When at length he paused at the foot of the fissure he looked back—and found her close at his heels.

"You're awful slow and stiff," she taunted, as if she had not just warned him to proceed cautiously. "I'll go 'long up and wait. G'by."

And up she went with a flash of tanned ankles and a swirl of swaying skirt, her toes gripping with unerring surety at the soil slanting down within the crevice, her lithe young body swinging with easy grace, her hair flaming like an upshooting meteor. At the top she swung and laughed once more with the exhilaration of strenuous activity. Then she moved from sight.

"Whew!" breathed Douglas, contemplating the slope. "Our catamount can climb! Imagine a corseted, high-heeled city girl doing that. Imagine *me* doing that! If I don't come flopping back down here end-over-end I'll be lucky. Well, here goes."

Digging in his toes, he started. For a few feet all went well. Then his soles began to slip, and only a clutch with his free hand stopped his slide. By the time he was half-way up he was clambering crabwise, forcing in his heels. And when he neared the top he was using every support he had—feet, hands, and gun-

butt. However, he made the ascent without a fall; and, thanks to his recent days of roving, without much loss of wind.

Marion had disappeared, but the little bundle of food lay beside the cleft. Presently she came creeping back on hands and knees from the outer brink and stood erect.

"Well, Mister Slowpoke, you got here before noon after all," she gibed. "I 'most went to sleep waitin', the sun's so hot out yender. There ain't any detectives into sight, so when you git rested we can travel 'long."

"Rested? I'm not so feeble as you think," he smiled. "And just remember that I have to lift about seventy or eighty more pounds of bone and meat at every step than you do. You're only a flyweight. Bet I can lift you with one arm."

"Bet you can't!" she flashed.

Forthwith he laid down his gun and swept her off her feet. Steadying her with the right hand lightly laid against her shoulders, he raised her on his rigid left forearm. She wriggled, slipped, and instinctively seized him around the neck. Both his arms suddenly tightened around her. Her face came close to his.

The next instant a firm little hand set itself against his chin. Though his grip still held her, her face now was more than a foot away. The slender arm between them was like a steel bar.

"Let go!" she commanded.

"What's the matter? Afraid I'll kiss you?" His eyes were dancing recklessly. "Or are you afraid I won't?"

"Afraid—you—won't? That's 'bout 'nough! You ain't under a bridge now!"

The twit stung. His face darkened. He set her down abruptly, picked up his gun, moved away toward the left.

"I—I didn't mean that," she quickly added. "I dunno why I said it—it jest come, like. But—remember, we come up here to see somebody."

He nodded sombrely and strode on. Confound it! Why did these hill girls take things so seriously? He hadn't meant to kiss her anyhow. Or had he? He didn't know; maybe, in that momentary devil-may-care mood, he would have done it. And what if he had? There was nothing fatal about a careless kiss or so, all in fun. But then, there was Steve, of course. Yes, that was it. That fierce, vengeful, desperate boy—she was cleaving to him, one of her own people, and the kiss of any other man was not to be lightly taken. So be it. She was right enough, of course.

Yet, in his unintrospective way, he felt a vague irritation over the eternal presence of Steve. If only the youth did not exist —— He let the thought go no farther. He did not consider what might be if Steve were removed. Neither did he recall that this girl's blood was tainted by her parentage. He let the whole matter die, and instead put his mind on the lonely, sick boy himself, victim of Snake Sanders' machinations and fugitive from the insensate monster which killed men's souls—the Law. Sympathy for him again warmed his heart. He pressed on in his errand of aid.

"D'you shave every day?" sounded a small voice at his heels.

"Uh? Shave?" He groped, bewildered by the sudden change of thought. "Why—yes. Every morning after breakfast. Why?"

"Your chin's so smooth. It ain't all full of splinters like pop's. And your face always looks so clean. I never see any other man that kept his face clean every day. I—I kind of like it."

The ingenuous statement made him laugh.

"Glad there's something about me that you like," he mocked. "But to me it's not so much a matter of appearance as of comfort. I can't stand a mess of bristles on my face and throat. It's prickly. So I slice it off."

They trudged on, following a faintly defined path well back from the brink, invisible to any eye which might look up from below. After awhile she said softly, as if talking to herself: "Steve's gittin' awful whiskers onto his face."

Remembering the bristly black beard he had noticed on the fugitive's unshaven face at their last meeting, he nodded carelessly.

"Of course. How can he shave?" he reminded her. "But maybe he can clean it off soon. We'll see."

"What you figgerin' to do?"

"Ask him to come down and hide in my house, where he'll be dry and warm."

She gave a little gasp.

"Why—why, he can't! With them detectives

pesterin' round—if they should come he'd be caught into a reg'lar trap. And you'd git 'rested too."

"Maybe. But it's getting too cold for him to lie up here. To-day's hot, but to-morrow —— He's got to move somewhere soon."

Soberly she studied him.

"That's so, but he won't come, I don't b'lieve. I tried to git him to come down and stay to our house, but he wouldn't. He dasn't trust pop. And them detectives, they watch everywheres. They come there one time and asked pop a lot of questions. I dunno what they asked him—I wasn't round; but pop's apt to say 'most anything or do 'most anything—depends on how drunk he is."

"Steve's wise not to go there, then. But it's different at my place."

No more was said. Marion looked often at him as they journeyed on, and her face was troubled. He kept his forward-ranging gaze on the vague path.

After a time he found himself emerging at the brink. Here she resumed the lead. Down over a jagged confusion of leaning bowlders she picked a tortuous way, followed by the more slowly moving man. Presently they were under the cliff, amid thick brush, on steep but firm-soiled ground whence protruded a few deep-sunk blocks. She moved a rod or two to the left and paused.

"See anything?" she questioned.

He studied the surroundings and shook his head. In the blank face of the precipice showed no opening—not even a crack. The cliff, the ground, the brush,

the half dozen juts of gray stone—there was no sign of a hiding-place. True, there were two fair-sized bowlder-tops close together, with a small black hole between; but the hole must be only a cranny in the earth, like hundreds of others along the wall—a good place to break a leg, but not to hide in. He did not give it a second glance.

Yet it was at this despised hole that she knelt. Into it her head vanished, and from it sounded her signal —a soft "Hoo-hoo" almost inaudible above ground. From somewhere down in the bowels of the tightly packed earth floated a faint sound in reply. Her head reappeared.

"I'll go down first to tell him it's all right," she murmured. "You wait 'bout two minutes or so, then come 'long. It'll be tight squeezin'—you're so wide acrost the shoulders—but you can git through."

She pushed the apron-package into the hole. Then she turned once more to him.

"This here is my little secret, that I've come to for years," she told him. "There ain't anybody ever been into it but me—and Steve. The place Uncle Eb took Steve to wasn't so good—it was too easy to find—so I brought him here."

With that she was gone into the gloomy opening.

For a minute or two he waited, looking at the hole and picturing to himself a lonely, heart-sick little girl coming here year after year to forget the drunken coarseness of her father and the profane nagging of her mother. A disappointing place, this prosaic cavity; not at all the picturesque grotto his fancy had painted

when, in idle moments, his mind had reverted to her confession of a "playhouse" where she took refuge by her "own self." Yet somewhere within it must be a real cavern among the sunken rocks, where, forgetful of the raw crudity of her life, she had lain many a time gazing star-eyed at the figments of her dreams. Did she ever, he wondered, dream of a Prince Charming who should bear her over the hills and far away into a world of lights and laughter, music and perfume?

Perhaps her untutored imagination could not even vision such a world. Perhaps her soul, like her body, was hemmed in by the eternal rim of the rock bowl—that soul which yet groped vaguely upward with its unconscious artistry, its vision of dead men who shook the hills with their tramping, its effort to place on paper the beauty of the green pool in Coxing Kill. Perhaps Lou Brackett's dictum was inexorably true: *Them that's borned into the Traps lives into the Traps and dies into the Traps.*

Recalling himself, he dropped to his knees, dubiously sized up the passage, sank prone, and began worming his way inward.

Once inside, he found that it was not so black as it had looked. Somewhere ahead, light came faintly up from a lower level. The tunnel slanted at an easy grade and curved a little to the right. For the first few feet he found her surmise correct—it was a tight passage for him. But, after inching along in growing distaste for the squeezing discomfort of the hole, he found the rock walls veering aside and lifting above

him. A few feet more, and he had room to rise to all fours. The dim light grew a shade stronger. He found his face hanging over a drop, below which was a steep, curving chute.

Swinging his feet foremost, he went over and down, sliding a little but holding himself by hand-grips along the wall. He stopped on the level lip of another drop.

Before him widened an oblong cavern, fairly well lighted by rifts in the stony walls and by another entrance at its farther end—a sizable hole at the floor-level, evidently leading downward. It looked quite dry, except for a tiny trickle of water down one side; its floor was well carpeted with leaves, obviously brought in from above; and in the walls were irregular natural shelves, most of which held small treasures of childhood—a cracked cup or two, worn-out cooking utensils—such things as a little girl might have brought there to make it a real "playhouse." And some six feet away was the little girl herself—Marion—with her wild Steve.

"H'are ye, Hamp," the youth hoarsely greeted him—and clutched at his chest. For a second or two he set his teeth; then, throwing one sleeve across his mouth to muffle the sound, coughed repeatedly. When he lowered the arm his lips were drawn. Dumbly he rubbed his chest.

"Howdy, partner," Douglas returned, surveying him keenly and noting his haggard face and hollow eyes. "Sore inside?"

"Got cold," nodded Steve. "Can't stop this 'ere

cough a-rackin'. Can't sleep good. An' ther's a misery onto my left lung. Lot o' pains like red-hot needles. Got to breathe short. Cough nigh rips the lung outen me. Makes too much noise too. If them dicks hearn it ——"

He spoke in short whispers, his hand rubbing mechanically, as if it had done the same thing at frequent intervals for many hours. The man above regarded him gravely. Though strong of lung himself, he knew what pleurisy was; knew, too, that there was such a thing as pleuropneumonia. The lad below looked to be rapidly heading into something of the kind. He certainly was not the healthy young fellow he had been that day in Uncle Eb's barn.

"Head ache? Feel hot?" Douglas quizzed.

"Yuh. Head's like to split. I'm hot all over, like."

Another strangled cough, with its after-grimace of pain. Douglas looked below, found a couple of shelves forming natural steps, and descended. He laid a hand on Steve's forehead. The hot skin seemed to burn him.

"H'm! I was afraid so," he muttered. "Fever, headache, pleural pains, cough. H'm! Well, Steve, now listen. You're sick. If you stay here you'll be sicker. Now my place is sort of lonesome, and nobody calls on me; and the woods are right handy to the back door, so you could make a quick getaway if you had to; and it's dry and ——"

A determined shake of the head cut short his preamble.

"Marry told me," the lad refused. "I ain't a-goin'.

Mebbe I'm sick. Mebbe I'll die. But it's all right. I'll die by inches 'fore I'll go wher' I'll git caught."

"Don't be a fool! What's the good of ——"

"Don't say no more. I ain't a-goin'. Ther's things wuss'n me dyin'. Goin' back to the pen's one. Gittin' my friends into trouble's 'nother. I ain't got but three friends into the world. Marry an' you an' Uncle Eb. I come awful nigh gittin' two o' ye into a mess t'other day. Them dicks'd make ye sweat blood if they knowed ye was a-helpin' me. An' I don't danger ye no more."

He writhed with another cough. Amazed by the unexpected chivalry of the hill boy, Douglas stood dumb. Presently Steve went on with the same pain-clipped sentences.

"'Sides, I can't live into a house. Marry'll tell ye that. I warn't borned into a house. I was dropped into the woods like—like a wolf-pup. I can die like that same wolf: into the rocks or the trees. I ain't a-dyin' yet, anyways. An' till I do die ——

"I went to school a little. Not much. Couldn't stand it 'less'n the winders was open. But I learnt readin'. I see a piece 'bout a feller that said 'Gimme liberty or gimme death.' That's me. I live free—if it's into a hole. Mebbe I die into the same hole. But I die free—not like a rat into a house-wall. Gimme liberty or ——"

A tearing spasm of muffled coughing ended his talk. When it had passed he slumped down against the side of the cavern, his brow knotted in agony, his hand rubbing feebly, but his gaunt jaw set like the rock

against which he leaned. And Douglas, after a moment more of grave study, gave him up. He was not to have company in his haunted house after all. His toil last night on the rear door and the bedroom window had come to naught.

Yet the time was to come when, despite the flat refusal of the fugitive to leave his den, that smooth-sliding back window in Hampton's home was to serve Steve well.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HAND OF THE GHOST

DOUGLAS pushed off his hat and ran a hand through his hair, puzzling over what to do now. Despite Marion's prediction, he had not seriously considered the possibility of an inflexible rejection of his offer, and now he was somewhat at a loss.

Squatting beside Steve, he absently dug up his empty pipe and puffed at it, thinking. Steve looked wistful, but said nothing. Marion, sitting on a little leaf-cushioned projection of stone, watched both of them unobserved.

The contrast between the two male faces was striking. Douglas, blond, strong, clean of skin and clear-cut of feature, thoughtfully serious, working out the problem of helping another: Steve, swarthy, wan, black-bristled, unkempt, grim-jawed, determined to follow his own course despite reason and sense; truly, they seemed as opposite as light and darkness, as blithe hope and sombre desperation. Yet the dark face, perhaps, would strike more forcefully on vibrant heart-strings; for mingled with its resolution was an unconscious pathos. To a sympathetic eye, too, the ragged, shapeless clothing of the younger man would have appealed more strongly than the well-fitting garb of the other. But Marion was not looking at the dress

of the pair. Silently, steadfastly, here in her dream-cavern she was studying faces—and men.

"Well," Douglas said slowly, removing his pipe—and stopped. He saw the hollow eyes, eloquent with tobacco-hunger, follow the motion of the blackened briar. Wiping its stem on a sleeve, he passed it over. Steve grabbed it and began eagerly sucking in the strong incense of bygone smokes. The little touch of comradeship was not lost on the girl, nor was the next movement of the blond man. He produced a tobacco-tin, picked out a third of its contents, and handed the rest to Steve.

"Better not smoke it," he suggested. "The smoke will float outside. Chew it. I'll have Uncle Eb get more for both of us. Now I won't argue with you about moving. You say you won't, and that ends it. But you've got to doctor up. You've got to bake that pain out of your lung, kill that cough, knock out the headache and fever, keep warm and dry. Take care of yourself. Remember you're not so hardy as you were three years ago."

Steve nodded, grinding the pipe-stem between his teeth.

"Them three years would of kilt me, but I had to live to git Snake."

"Uh-huh. Now I'll go home and send up the best medicine I have. It isn't much: mostly quinine. But you take it. To-night, when there isn't much chance that anybody'll be prowling up here, you make a fire, boil some water, bake your chest with hot cloths. Marion can fix you up a mustard plaster, too, and

fetch it back with the medicine; you wrap it around that lung, and it ought to draw out the misery. I'll send you up some good wool socks, too. And you wear 'em! Now will you follow Old Doc Hampton's orders?"

"I'll foller 'em, Hamp."

"Good enough. Now I'll go get that medicine." He arose and clapped on his hat. "I won't be back here myself unless I'm needed—the fewer that come here the better. But take care of yourself."

Steve gripped the extended hand, his face softening.

"Much 'bliged, Hamp. An' take care o' yer own self. Snake's a-fixin' to git ye some way, I bet ye. Cuss him, will I ever git to him?"

In the cavernous eyes, in the prediction of trouble from Snake, were a significance which Douglas was to remember later on, but which he hardly noticed now. He only answered the rebellious question.

"Not until you're able to handle him. Right now you can't even handle yourself."

Steve's mouth tightened in angry admission that he realized it. With a last long draw at the pipe he handed it back.

"I'll handle him right rough 'fore long," he gritted. "G'by."

With a nod and a smile Douglas followed Marion, who, still wordless, now was half out of sight in the lower entrance. Down they went, passing through a series of smaller caverns, twisting and crouching and dropping, until they came out into sunlight. Before them, hardly a rod away, rose the face of the

cliff. Around were bowlders half as big as houses. Among these the girl led an irregular way—and they were under an overhanging crag, looking out across the Traps.

Looking back, he decided that any one would have an extremely difficult time in finding Steve's covert unless guided to it. Once away from here, he doubted whether he himself could retrace his course. Marion's dream-cave was as complete a hiding-place as could well be imagined: double entrances and exits, both almost impossible of discovery, the upper one forming a natural flue for a night fire; well watered, with wood at hand for the taking, plenty of air and sufficient light; yes, it was almost ideal—until the snows should come.

"Go careful down here," the girl's voice broke in on his reflections. "It's pretty rough. Here's where I took a fall the night the catamount 'most got me."

Down again they went, over a steep talus; among more bowlders, and out at last on grassy, bushy soil; through undergrowth to a faint foot-track running north. Along this they trod for some time in silence.

"If it's a fair question, what did Steve mean by saying he was born like a wolf-pup?" he asked at length.

"It's so," she said, half reluctantly. "His—his folks wasn't married, and his pop went off and left his mom 'fore Steve was borned, and he never come back. His mom, she went kind of queer into the head about it. She was into the woods all the time, a-travelin' and a-whisperin', folks say. Steve was borned out-

doors, like he says. She died pretty soon, and so he hasn't got any folks."

Another long silence. Now he knew what Uncle Eb meant by saying the boy had been born unlucky and never had had a chance. Poor, pitiful little tragedy of the hills! The girl deserted by her man just when she most needed his companionship and protection; the staring, whispering young mother-to-be wandering in the leafy solitudes; the new little life coming into the world as primitively as that of the first-born son of mankind; the kindly old Mother Earth taking back into her great bosom one more of her daughters who had loved and lost—a tragedy ever new, yet old as the trust of women and the callousness of men. Poor little mother! Poor Steve!

He might have asked more about the boy—how he had lived and grown—but a glance at the girl told him she would say no more. In all his wanderings among the people of the Traps, this was the first time any one had told him anything about the past of another; and even now it probably was told only because Steve himself had virtually given permission. He asked nothing further. It was she who now asked a question or two of her own.

"When you asked him to come down to your house had you forgot the ha'nt might git him?"

"By George, I did! Clean forgot that ha'nt of mine. Is that why he wouldn't come?"

"No-o, I guess not. Not so much. But mebbe 'twas one of the things he was thinkin' about; he figgers a lot of things into his head that don't come

outen his mouth. But tell me, jest what does that ha'nt do? The same kind of things all the time? Nobody else ever stayed there long 'nough to find out if the ha'nt worked reg'lar. You know him pretty well by now, I shouldn't wonder."

"Well, I don't pay much attention to him. He—or it—scared me green in the face the first night, but he's never done me any real harm, and I've never seen anything in a white sheet gibbering at me—nor anything else. But this is what I know about him." And he described the muffled footfalls in attic and stairway, the rustling and movement of the mattress, and the uncanny suggestion that *something* else was there.

"Ooh!" She shuddered and looked nervously around. Then, banishing the visions conjured up by his words, she became practical. "Did you ever think that mebbe the thing walkin' round was a rat?"

"A rat? If he is, Mister Rat has feet as big as pillows. I thought of it, yes. But it's queer—I've never heard a rat or a mouse scamper or gnaw in that house. You'd think there would be plenty of them, but I've never seen nor heard a sign. And I'm positive it was no rat that got into bed with me."

"M-h'm. Well, I wonder, now—do you want a cat? We've got four of 'em, always pesterin' round for somethin' to eat. They're Spit and Spat and Fit and Fat—I named 'em all my own self. Spit and Spat are ugly and they make noises like their names. Fit has fits and Fat's fat. I'll give you Spit if you want him. He's quick as lightnin' and an awful good ratter,

and he'll be company for you, too. Leave that attic door open and see what he'll do. Want to?"

"All right," he chuckled. "But if that heavy-footed ha'nt steps on Spit's tail and Spit raises the roof with a gosh-awful yowl when I'm asleep—there won't be any house left. I'll go head-first through the wall and knock down the whole layout."

She burst into a merry laugh, in which he joined. Quickly she suppressed it, however, looking around once more—not for a night-walking phantom this time, but for something which prowled as stealthily by day, ranging the whole countryside: the sinister pair whose presence kept Steve in a hole in the ground.

"You hadn't ought to make me laugh so sudden-like," she reproved. But as they went onward she giggled several times, and he chuckled in sympathy. Nothing more was said, however, until they emerged into a small field. Before them, dingy and bare, stood the Oaks house.

"Lost?" she smiled then, seeing his surprised look. "Didn't think it was so nigh, did you? We come back by the short way—it don't take half as long as goin'. Tell me"—she drew closer to him—"what you a-huntin' pop for?"

He hesitated. Then, as bluntly as she had revealed her knowledge of Lou and the bridge, he told her. She did not seem much surprised, though she was plainly disturbed.

"I was 'fraid so," she murmured. "I figgered 'twas somethin' like that, after you brought that corn-hook home. But if pop done that, 'twas Snake that put him

up to it! Consarn him!" She stamped a foot in swift wrath. "Snake! He *is* a snake—a nasty p'isonous copperhead that bites without a warnin'! And he gits clear while other folks pay!"

"Snake's the man I want," he acquiesced. "I've been after him, too. But I want to get the truth out of your pop. And I'll get it ——"

"I'm 'fraid you won't," she interrupted soberly. "I'm 'fraid he's gone for good. Seems like we'd have heard somethin' 'fore if he was a-livin'. Mebbe —mebbe Snake done somethin' to him that night. Snake, he's a-layin' awful low since then; nobody's seen him."

"Well, he'll come to light sometime. He'll have to. And now we have to look out for somebody else. I'll get down to the house and bring up that medicine. By-by."

"G'by."

They parted, to his mingled regret and relief—for, be a girl's father ever so base, it is inevitably distasteful to discuss with her that father's ignominy. Down the road he walked fast toward his own abode and the waiting medicine.

With the sun-baked sand under his feet he realized anew how unseasonably hot was the day. The air was breathless, and heat-waves curved and twined visibly along the highway. Soon he shed his coat and shoved back his hat. As he neared his haunted house, too, he became more and more aware that the atmosphere was tainted by the same odor which had been breeze-borne to his nostrils earlier in the day.

Then, rounding the little curve beyond which stood the Dalton house, he checked his stride.

Beside the road, in his own yard, were a weather-beaten wagon and a white horse. They were Uncle Eb's. The old man himself was not in sight.

Douglas jumped forward with increased speed. Uncle Eb might be waiting for him in the house, but that was hardly likely; the old man did not like that house. Had something happened to him?

The explosive voice of Eb himself came to him. It broke from the brushy land on the other side of the road, mingled with sounds of progress through thick going.

"—Jest like Jake Dalton," it was saying, "jest like I'm a-tellin' ye. Hampton never had no hand into this, though I wouldn't blame him none s'posin' he had —— Wal! thar he is now!"

From the brush emerged Eb and two others: the man-hunters, Ward and Bill. All were chewing tobacco furiously. All looked pale.

"What's wrong?" Douglas sharply demanded.

"Wrong! Good gosh, son, is yer nose stopped? It's Nat!"

Dumb, the blond man gaped at the three. Ward and Bill were eyeing him keenly. Uncle Eb pulled off his hat, mopped his brow on a sleeve, squirted a mouthful of brown juice, and went on barking.

"Jest like Jake Dalton! He's up into the bresh—'side the brook—face down an' deader'n—wal, 'most as dead as Jake. He's been ther' three-four days, these fellers think—ever sence he run outen yer house

that night he left his cawn-hook. An' this hot weather to-day—wugh! I ain't a-goin' to High Falls to-day after all. I'm a-goin' right back home soon's we —— Have ye got a shovel? Nat needs a shovel powerful bad."

"What happened to him?" Somehow Douglas knew the answer already, but he had to ask.

"What happened to Jake Dalton? I dunno. But he's jest like Jake—swelled up awful, an' not a mark onto him—no gunshot, no knife, no nawthin'—jest dead! Ther's sumpthin' into that house o' yourn, son —that ha'nt or sumpthin', I dunno—that kilt him jest the same's it kilt Jake. He run into the bresh an' fell down an' died same's Jake done. Have ye got that shovel?"

"No."

"Wal, I'll go borry one. Glad to git away a few minutes. Hoss, c'm'ere! Whoa! G'yapalong!"

With an apprehensive backward look at the house the agitated old fellow was off. The man-hunters spat in unison, never taking their eyes off Douglas, who still stared at the brush. Mechanically he got out his pipe, loaded it, lit it, and puffed.

"Well, fellows," he said presently, "this is news to me. I've been hunting this Nat Oaks—he was the one I suspected of knifing my dummy—but I didn't finish him. Looks bad for me, perhaps, but ——"

"You're in the clear," cut in Ward. "We might make out a case if we tried hard enough, but we ain't tryin'. If the stiff had wounds on him you might have some explainin' to do; and we're goin' to do some

lookin' round, anyhow. But unless somethin' new turns up we'll leave the thing lay as it is."

Douglas nodded and reluctantly stepped toward the hidden brook. The other two remained where they were.

A short distance in from the road he found Nigger Nat. He was stark naked, his clothing having been cut from him by the pocket-knives of the officers in their search for wounds. Feet, hands, and face were mired by the mud in which he had expired; and the gross face now was a bloated mask of bestiality. Nowhere on the torso was any mark.

Douglas took one rapid, comprehensive look. Then he retired hastily to the road, where he reloaded his hot pipe and awaited the return of Uncle Eb. Wordless, two chewing and one smoking, the trio of city men stood regarding the haunted house.

The ha'nt, which of late Douglas had carelessly regarded as a sort of joke, was a joke no longer. With his own eyes he had just looked on the horrid handiwork of the grisly thing which stalked within those walls by night. What was it? Why had it not closed its fearful grip on his own throat? How long before it would do so?

Perhaps Jake Dalton and Nat Oaks knew the answer to the ghastly riddle. But their lips were sealed for all time.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE SHADOWS

In the house where Nigger Nat, assassin, had himself been struck by the hand of Death in the night, Douglas Hampton, alias Hammerless, alias Hamp, sat alone.

Nigger Nat lay in his grave, if grave it could be called; a hastily dug hole into which he had been rolled like a dead skunk. No pretense of ceremony, and certainly none of mourning, had graced his departure from the sight of men. Nor was any headboard set above his mound. As soon as he had been disposed of, his burial party had departed with all speed.

For the sake of the living, however, the spot where he lay would be not only marked, but improved. Even now his headboard was being carved—and by the man whom he had attempted to murder. On a piece of planking, found among the odds and ends of Jake Dalton's shed and dressed clean with the hatchet, Douglas was cutting in deep, bold letters:

N A T O A K S

He intended, too, to clear away the brush around the mound and cut to it a straight trail from the road, so

that the women whom Nat left behind him could—if they wished—visit his grave. But that work could wait for another day. Now, while Hampton's hands were drawing his knife-point along the neat lines and hollowing out the spaces between them, his mind was reviewing the events since the interment.

For a time the four men, united in a common task of humanity, had shelved their mutual distrust in fruitless search for the cause of Nat's death. With Douglas' tacit permission, the pair of officers had inspected the house from roof to foundations, Uncle Eb meanwhile narrating in full the tale of Jake Dalton's death. Douglas in turn had told of his first meeting with Oaks, the fight with the dogs and Nat himself, his whim to view the sunrise, his finding of the corn-hook driven into the dummy. He did not, however, deem it necessary to mention the warning note which he had partly burned.

"The feller ye want to git," Uncle Eb barked, rounding on Ward and Bill, "is Snake Sanders! Git him an' ye've got the man that's back of all the devil-work into the Traps. If ye make him talk, ye'll git an awful lot o' knowledge all to oncet."

The pair, taking in everything and saying almost nothing, had nodded slightly at this. And at length, non-committal as to what they might plan to do, they had gone. Before departure, however, Ward had scoffed at the ha'nt.

"I don't take any stock in this ghost stuff," he said. "Oaks was an old souse. Heart prob'ly was rotten with booze. He came in here with a bun on, took a

swipe at the dummy, got cold feet sudden—heard somethin', perhaps, a rat or somethin'—and beat it. Heart quit on him and he croaked.

"This Dalton, you say he was a souse too. Funny that two guys should croak the same way in the same place, yeah. But if the booze you guys make around here is as bad as the wildcat whiskey I've struck in some other places, I ain't much surprised. It'd kill anybody that lapped it up for a steady diet. So long. Come on, Bill."

When they were out of the way, Douglas had talked awhile with Uncle Eb. To him he had told something of Steve's condition, and from him he had learned that Marion already knew of the finding of her father's body. In his straightforward way Uncle Eb had gone to the nearest place—the Oaks house—for the shovel, and had given her the news. She had said little—"acted 'most like she was expectin' sumpthin' like that," Eb said—and gone at once to her mother.

"An' now 'bout you, son,—ye better not stay into this place no longer," the old man had concluded. "Come up an' live 'long o' me, don't ye want to?"

But the anxious invitation was declined with thanks. Douglas had determined to do now something which more than once previously he had thought of doing—to remain awake all night and catch the ha'nt, if it could be caught. The presence of the thing in his house was a challenge to him; and if the phantom walked to-night, he vowed, he would smash it or himself be smashed. This intention, however, he kept to himself, merely saying that he had been unharmed

thus far and knew no reason why he should not remain so.

So, bearing with him the quinine and other medicines which Douglas thought might be useful to Steve, the old man had gone back to the Oaks house and then home. Under the circumstances, Douglas himself did not feel like intruding just then on the girl and her mother; and the errand could be done just as well by Uncle Eb. And now, back to the wall and eyes lifting now and then to survey all around him, Hampton was toiling on the headboard. And the hot day was nearing its end.

Lucky, thrice lucky had been Steve's refusal to accompany him home, he thought: lucky for Steve, for Marion, for himself. Alone, he had come back openly and opportunely. With Steve he would have come more slowly and furtively, and by that time the man-hunters might have been scouting around in the woods on an investigation tour—and promptly sprung on their prey. There would certainly have been a fight, and before it ended Hampton and even Marion might have outlawed themselves. Yes, it was lucky all around.

Leaning back, he inspected his handiwork, yawned, and clicked his knife shut. Nigger Nat's monument was completed. Glancing through the open doorway at the lengthening shadows, he lifted his brows and pulled out his watch.

"Where's the time gone?" he asked himself. "It's almost sundown. Better rustle some grub and clear the decks for action against Mister Ha'nt. Hope this

isn't his night off. Do ha'nts work union hours, I wonder? Midnight to daybreak, maybe? Might get some sleep if I only knew. It's going to be a long, long night."

He yawned again, drowsy from the heavy heat of the day. When his supper was eaten and his pipe was going he yawned still more widely. Twilight now filled the great bowl outside—the oddly transparent twilight of early evening in the Traps, which lay in shadow while the sun still shone beyond the western heights. Next would come the grayish blur of true twilight, deepening gradually into night. And when dense darkness should enwrap all things and the evil man-killer of this house should begin to stir about—then what?

He arose, stretching and shaking himself to cast off his sleepiness. After a turn up and down the room he lifted his gun, ejected the shells, tested the firing-pins with a snap or two, looked carefully at the ammunition, and reloaded.

"Little old gun, you've been a real pal," he soliloquized. "I bought you just because you looked good and because I thought I might get a bit of hunting somewhere up in this country before going back to town. Little did I think you'd save a girl and blow cats and dogs all to thunder and shoot at ha'nts ——"

"Yoo-hoo!"

The musical call from outside cut short his monologue. In three strides he was at the door. At the edge of the road stood Marion. On the sand at her feet rested a sack in which something was tumbling about.

"Don't you never put down that gun, even when you're into the house?" she asked as he crossed the grass-ground. He looked foolishly down at the forgotten weapon, still gripped loosely in one hand. Without awaiting an answer, she went on: "But you need it, I shouldn't wonder. Are you a-goin' to stay here now, after—after what come to pop?"

"Yep. Going to sit up to-night and see what will happen."

She contemplated him soberly, then looked down at the bag.

"I figgered that's what you'd do. I—I wish you wouldn't. But I brought down some company, like I promised. This here is Spit."

As if answering to its name, the moving thing in the sack vented a catty spitting sound.

"You'll want to shut the door and the winders, if there's any open, 'fore you untie his bag," she cautioned. "He's wild, and he'll go like a shot if there's any way outen the house."

"I'll take care of him. Why do you wish I wouldn't stay here?"

She flushed a little, looked at him, dropped her eyes again and stirred the sand with a foot.

"Why, you—you're a neighbor, kind of. And you—you've been good to Steve." The name came in a whisper.

"Oh. I see. Did you take the medicine to him?"

"Yes. He's a-takin' care of himself. But he's wilder'n ever at Snake Sanders, now he knows about

pop. He didn't like pop much, but it makes him hate Snake all the more. Where—where is pop?"

"Over yonder," he told her gently. "In a day or so you can go in. I'm going to cut a path. You're not blaming me for this thing, are you, Marion?"

"No, I ain't. Mom, she's wild jest now—says if you never come here this wouldn't happened, and so on—but that's foolish, and I told her so. She'll git over it. But"—the firm little jaw set—"if Snake Sanders comes a-pesterin' round once more now he won't never walk outen our yard! I'll fix him my own self!"

"How?"

"With pop's gun. 'Tain't much good, but it'll shoot. I got it ready this afternoon, and if I see his sneakin' face jest once I won't ask questions. I never wanted to see him 'fore, but I'm lookin' for him now!"

It was no sudden flare of temper that brought forth the threat. It was the cold wrath of the hills that sounded in her quiet voice, the deathless hate of the avenger that glimmered under her curving brows. Once more Douglas studied a new Marion: a girl resolute, reckless, ominously hard.

"I wouldn't do that," he counseled. "Put the gun on him, but don't shoot. March him down here and let me have him. Maybe I can make him clear Steve."

"Mebbe," she half agreed. "I'm a-goin' now. It's gittin' dark. G'by."

She was gone, running lightly along the shadowy road. Until she disappeared he stood watching her. Then he lifted the bag and returned to the house.

Mindful of her caution, he shut the outer door and closed the window of his sleeping-room before removing the cord from the mouth of the sack. It was well that he did. When the rangy, rumpled Spit was dumped on the bare floor he gave one baleful glare at the man towering over him, one swift survey of his surroundings, one spitting comment on the place—then he was not where he had been. He was tearing about like tawny lightning let loose.

Douglas made no effort to pursue him. To do so would have been as futile as chasing a comet. He only stood marveling at the animal's speed and wondering whether he had not better let him out before he shot bodily through a window-pane. What good would Spit do here, anyway? He would be only a complication in the still-hunt of the ha'nt. But—Marion had taken the trouble to bring him, and —— Oh, well, let him stay.

The lank, homely brute threw himself at every window, every door, seeming hardly to have hit one before he was at another. The man gave up even trying to watch him. Moving to his supply-shelf, he cut a chunk of raw bacon and held it until the baffled Spit finally paused, looking for a new point of attack. Then he threw the meat.

Spit jumped into the air, came down glaring, circled the meat, spat at it, sniffed at it, tasted it, considered it with tail yanking from side to side—and accepted it. With famished speed he gnawed it down. When it was gone he lapped his jaws and looked at the man with a shade of friendliness. It was poor cat-food,

that smoked fat; but it was food, and the half-wild creature would eat almost anything. In fact, he was ready to devour more of the same.

But he got no more. The man placed on the floor a cupful of water, then shoved his backless chair against the rear wall and settled himself for the vigil. The gloaming now was rapidly thickening into darkness, and there was nothing to do but await events.

For some time he sat quiet, hearing only the solemn chant of deep-voiced crickets, the muffled conversation of katydids, the almost inaudible padding of the cat's feet on the boards. Now and then he vaguely made out the lean form of the animal pausing near him. Then it moved and vanished into the gloom, uneasily inspecting every inch of the strange quarters. Nothing else passed within his range of vision; nothing stepped around up-stairs; nothing rustled in the bedroom.

An hour droned past, and another crept on its way. The silent man's lids began to droop. His recently formed habit of going to bed early was asserting itself. So were the drowsiness and languor induced by the bygone heat. The steady chirp of the crickets, too, and the dull darkness—they were floating him gradually away on an ebb of consciousness. He shook himself awake, shifted his position, leaned forward, away from the wall. With renewed alertness he probed the gloom. Nothing was there.

Little by little another hour snailed along. Little by little the watcher slumped farther forward. His gun remained steady across his knees, his eyes stayed open;

but his elbows were resting now on his thighs, and his gaze was a somnolent squint, centered on nothing. His body was half asleep, his mind more than half asleep; for it was dreaming, seeing things gone by and places far away, and other things much nearer—but not in this house: some things, indeed, which had not yet come about and might never come. And still nothing occurred to disturb his reverie.

Physical discomfort, not ghostly alarms, roused him again. The chair was hard, his position was growing cramped, his muscles demanded better comfort. Scanning the room again, he noted with surprise that he could see much more plainly. The windows, too, were light, and through them he could make out the darksome bulk of the trees. The Traps gulf was wanly illumined by a late-rising moon.

Stiffly he arose to stretch himself. Something turned gleaming eyes at him. It was Spit, very quiet now, crouched comfortably on the floor, watching two doors—the open one into the bedroom and the closed one at the foot of the stairs. Man and cat eyed each other a moment. Then the man in turn looked toward a door—the entrance to his own room, beyond which waited his blankets and easy couch of bough-tips.

After all, why not? He could sit against the wall there, rest his legs and back, and still keep awake. Better take the cat in there, too; then he wouldn't start clawing up toward the bacon-shelf or making other disturbance. Might as well be comfortable. As soon as he heard the ha'nt begin to tramp around

he could slip out and see whatever might be seen. All right, he would do it.

By patient persistence, he inveigled the suspicious but curious Spit into the rear room. Entering it himself, he had an afterthought: he reached to the attic door, turned its knob, swung it open, leaving free access for the stair-bumping spook. Then he went into his room and almost closed the door, leaving it only a little ajar to obviate the fumbling and noise of knob-turning when the time to leap out should come. Making sure that Spit still was there, he relaxed against the wall, gun ready beside him. And ——

In less than twenty minutes all good intentions and cats and ha'nts were obliterated from his mind by the velvety hand of Sleep.

What time it was when he awoke he never knew. But awake he did, to find himself lurching upward, every nerve tense, his gun clutched in his right hand.

The door was open wider now—open nearly a foot. In the room beyond lay slanting moonlight.

Out there, something was struggling.

Something was making a low, ghastly, inhuman noise.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DEMON OF THE DARK

Douglas felt his hair lift and his skin prickle, ice-cold. But he knocked the door wide and plunged out. In the moonshine stood no horrible figure. The noise was coming from the floor: a growling sound, a slithering scrape, irregular paddings, and the scratch of claws on wood.

There, in the semi-darkness between two windows, a small huddle writhed in hideous combat. Rooted to the floor, Douglas stood watching its contortions. Gradually the writhing movements diminished. But the low growl continued, and from the spot glared the fiery eyes of a cat which had made its kill.

The man started from his paralysis. Scratching a match along the wall, he held the little flare above his head and stared until his fingers twitched back, burned.

"Well—I'll—be ——" he muttered, his voice trailing into nothing.

He had looked on the ha'nt. He had seen Dalton's Death, murderer of men,—expiring in the jaws of a tom-cat.

Snatching the gas-lamp from its nail, he got it to burning and turned its ray on the uncanny little bunch below. In the white radiance the thing stood out in

horrid clarity. Though merged together, it comprised three separate parts. They were cat—rat—rattlesnake.

The cat's teeth were clamped in the neck of the reptile. The venomous fangs of the reptile were hooked into the head of the rat. The head of the rat was nearly hidden within the distended jaws of the sinuous slayer.

This much of the story was plain at a glance: the snake had killed the rat, begun to swallow its prey, and in its turn been pounced upon by the lightning-leaping Spit. But how had rodent and reptile come here? Why had he never seen them before? Why had Spit allowed the snake to get the rat first? Why did that snake's tail, still moving, give out no warning burr?

Douglas wasted no more time in puzzlement. Instead he began a close inspection—as close as seemed safe, in view of the fact that the savage cat struck viciously at him with hooked claws when he came too near. It was by no means impossible that some snake-venom might be on those claws, and the investigator was wary of them. Moving around with the light, he studied snake and rodent.

The rat was long, lank, and old. Its hoary hair, its big feet, the tip of one whitish whisker still visible at the edge of the serpent's gaping mouth, all proved its age. It was so old that it would move clumsily. In a silent house its feet would thump on the floor. If it descended stairs it would bump.

Nothing very queer about the rat. But about the

snake was something very queer indeed. Though it was well grown—more than a yard long, in fact—and thus should have been well equipped with the warning buttons of its species, it had none. It was a rattler without a rattle.

True, its tail bore a small rounded excrescence which might be an incipient button; but not a real, well-developed one. Somehow the tail looked blunt; as if a rattle once had been there but had been cut off, accidentally or otherwise. It kept moving, so that it was rather vague in outline. There was no doubt, however, about the absence of the horny joints which should have been there.

Narrow-eyed, Douglas stood regarding that unnatural tail. For no apparent reason, he suddenly wheeled and looked at the windows. Against the panes was pressed no leering face. Outside in the moonlight stood no sinister form. Slowly he turned back. Into his mind had flashed the picture of Snake Sanders loosing from a box on Dickie Barre a copperhead. Was the appearance of the snake in this house another attempt of the same sort?

"No," Reason told him. This thing had not been brought here to-night. It must have been in the place a long time. Two men had been killed by it. One, whose freshly carved headboard even now stood against the wall, had died several nights ago. The other had been struck down last spring. Beyond a doubt, this was what had ended the lives of Jake and Nat—striking at their bare feet, driving them in blind horror from the house, leaving on their skins only two

tiny wounds which, days later, would be overlooked by the men finding their frightful corpses in the woods or the brush. This creature must have been here for months.

His deductions were interrupted by Spit. Tiring at last of worrying its broken enemy, or perhaps eager to begin eating the rat, the cat loosed its hold and, ceaselessly growling, stepped around and smelt at the gray-haired victim of the snake.

"Hey! Quit that!" Douglas snapped. "You fool cat, that rat's poisoned! If you have the slightest scratch on your lips or in your mouth you'll die! Let it alone!"

At the impact of his voice Spit leaped aside, spat at him, stood flame-eyed, lips writhing and claws unsheathed. So menacing was the appearance of the creature, so evident its readiness to battle for possession of that rat, that the man took a backward step. Claws and teeth both might be envenomed; even if they were not, he knew that an ordinary cat-bite sometimes results fatally. But he did not intend to let the cat commit suicide. True, the poison might not injure the animal's stomach, but if it entered the blood ——

He shoved the bare flame of his lamp straight at the snarling visage. It was the best move he could have made. Had he attempted to grasp the animal, or even to push it away with a foot, the maddened creature might have sprung at him. At that moment a mere man meant little to that wild brute. But before the fire-demon imprisoned in that lamp, before the searing blue-white tongue licking out at his face,

even Spit's savage heart quailed. Spitting furiously, he sprang back.

Inexorably the flame followed him. It pressed him back into the bedroom. Then the outer door was drawn open. The light retreated. Spit sneaked back into the main room—but the white-hot tongue was waiting for him. It slid forward once more. Suddenly it made a twisting swoop toward his mouth. That was too much. With a snarly squall of panic a tawny streak shot through the doorway into the night. Spit was gone.

The door bumped shut. The man straightened up, relaxed, chuckled shortly. Then he turned the light again on the feebly squirming reptile and the lifeless rat; studied them a moment more; looked at the clean pine monument of Nat Oaks glimmering yellowish in the background; pivoted on his heels and frowningly contemplated the bedroom where both Jake and Nat had met their doom. For some minutes he stood there, playing the light over every visible inch of the room, particularly along the floor. Suddenly he started as if a dazzling ray had darted through his mental fog.

"By thunder!" he muttered. "I'll bet ——"

In another three seconds he was flat on the bedroom floor, shooting the light along the under side of the bed. He saw a series of squares of rope, upholding the thick corn-husk mattress. Within each square the mattress bellied downward. And in one of those rounded curves of cloth, near the outer edge of the bed, opened a hole.

Douglas lay there, staring up at that hole, until his position grew cramped. It was round and smooth-edged; the edges looked worn, as if something had often passed in and out—something scaly, perhaps, whose passage would wear away loose threads. The sagging cloth hung not more than a foot above the floor. And, now that his nose was near it, he became conscious of a repellent odor—a smell suggesting snakiness.

"Ugh!" He scrambled to his feet and took a breath of clean air. His gaze fell on the rent left in the middle of the bed by Nigger Nat's steel. Swift aversion to the whole room seized him. He spun about and stepped out of it. And as he left it he did something he never had done before—he pulled its creaky door shut behind him. He was through with that loathsome death-chamber for all time.

The dead snake now was almost motionless: only the blunt tail still quivered in reptilian tremors. Giving it only a passing glance, Douglas stopped before the open staircase and swung the light slowly from side to side, examining every step. When the all-revealing radiance was centered on the top he stood as if puzzled. Down to the bottom and up to the top he played it again.

"H'm! How come?" he queried.

The darkness gave no answer. Only the solemn crickets dirged on outside.

Up the echoing stairs he clumped, and on the groaning boards above he deliberately moved about, searching the dusty, dusky recesses of the eaves. Presently

the moving light stopped, shining steadily into one of the front corners. Through the dingy cobwebs festooning the nook he saw something which brought a satisfied nod.

"One," he said. With that he turned away and began descending the stairs.

Almost at the bottom, he halted short. The downward-pointing ray had revealed a thing hitherto invisible despite his careful scrutiny of the stairs; something which an up-ranging eye never would see, and which was discernible from above only because the swaying light had happened to strike on it.

"Two!" he exulted. "That's it! I've got the combination now. Farewell, Mister Ha'nt! Your little mystery is busted flat."

Yet the thing at which he was looking would hardly seem to be the key to an enigma. It was only a hole, very inconspicuous in the dirty wall, at the junction of the lowest step with the door-casing. And the thing which he had found up-stairs in the corner was merely another hole.

Resuming his downward way, he trod across the main room, leaned his gun against the wall, set his lamp on the stove, filled his pipe, sat down on his chair, puffed smoke, and chuckled.

"Yes, sir, Mister Rat, you're caught with the goods at last," he informed the lank old rodent on the floor. "You're the noisy half of the ha'nt. You're old and stiff, and your feet used to bump down like a ghost's heels. You lived around here somewhere—out in the shed, maybe, or up under the attic floor—and you

used to come out of that hole in the corner and ramble around, looking for anything to eat. Poor old Bumpety-Bump, I'll bet you're so ancient that you've lost all your teeth; you certainly look nearly starved. Anyhow, you'd find nothing up there, so you'd bump yourself down-stairs. Probably you smelt my cheese; I had some when I first came here, and Uncle Eb brought me up a huge slab of it later on.

"But when you hit the bottom you were stuck. That door was always shut. So you'd have to give it up. And with that other hole right handy, why go back up-stairs? You'd just ooze into that hole and let it go at that. So would any other sensible man.

"And that first night, when I came at you with a cannon, you heard me before I could open the door. So you just dived into the handy hole, and when I yanked the door almost off its hinges you were tee-totally gone. And while I was standing there growing goose-flesh you were probably sitting up in the wall and thumbing your old nose at me."

He laughed again in quiet self-derision.

"It must have been tough, though, to come down here every night, just drooling for that cheese, and find yourself always blocked. All the same, that's all that saved your life. This other gent here, Mister Side-Winder, must have been rat-hunting every night; that's why I've never heard rats around here; he got 'em all. And to-night when I left that door open and you came out—well, you know as much about that as I do.

"Mister Spit, our little guest of the evening, must have followed my noble example and gone to sleep in there. Or maybe he had a hard time pulling the door open; it does stick when it's almost shut. Anyhow, by the time he catapulted himself into the plot of this piece you were on your way down Mister Rattler's gullet—which was just as well for friend Spit, maybe. He could maul Mister Side-Winder then without a come-back. Glad of it, too. Spit's manners have been neglected, but he's a regular fellow, and I'm glad he didn't have to go out by the same route as Jake and Nat."

He puffed again, and his smile died. When he spoke again his voice was cold.

"And you, Yard-of-Poison—how did you get here? You've been here since spring. Maybe you came out too early, got caught in a cold snap, found Jake's door open, came in to get warm. Maybe. Anyway, you've been here since then. You found a hole in the under side of the mattress and crawled in among the husks for warmth and concealment. At night you got the warmth of Jake's body, too. And you paid for your lodging as a snake would. Some night when Jake got up in the dark for something you struck his foot. And while he died alone in the black woods behind here you crawled back into your hole, well satisfied with yourself.

"Some other fellows came, and you missed them. They didn't happen to come near you in the night, or you had caught a rat and were sleeping it off in your hole. And then I came. And you're the thing that

rustled the mattress beside me that night, and made the rickety old bed tremble—you're the thing I *felt* in the air, there in the room beside me. When I looked under the bed you weren't in sight: you had stopped when you felt me move. But you came out later, all right, and you'd have killed me if I'd stepped near you without my boots. And every night since then you've been sneaking around ready to get me. Lucky I changed beds, and never came out here barefoot for a drink in the night, and kept my door shut. Maybe Uncle Eb's right, and there's a good angel watching over me. Looks like it.

"And then Nigger Nat came, and you got him. I owe you one for that, perhaps. But he was only a tool. If you'd nailed Snake Sanders, now, I'd be right obliged to you. But you'd never touch him, of course, even if he stepped on you. He's your brother."

For awhile he smoked in thoughtful silence. The buttonless tail now lay inert. Within the house the only movement was that of his own puffing, the only sound the stutter of his wet-stemmed pipe.

"I wonder," he resumed at length, "I wonder whether your brother Snake knows anything about how you lost your rattle. I wonder if he had a grudge against Jake Dalton. If I ever get him in a corner I'll ask him about that. Yes, sir, I will."

His pipe stuttered more loudly and went out. A long yawn stretched his face. Reaching to the lamp, he shut off the gas flow and stood up.

"Yes, sir," he repeated, "I'll give Snake a third-degree on that point sometime. And until then I'll

just keep my mouth shut about your demise. I'll throw you two folks back into the woods to-morrow, and I'll let folks think the ha'nt is still ha'nting. And now, with your kind permission, I'm going back to bed. Good-night, Mister Ha'nt—good-night forever."

CHAPTER XXIV

CROSS TRAILS

NOVEMBER marshaled her gray hosts and marched them across the Shawangunks.

Out of the west they came, a slow, silent, grim array of clouds, drifting steadily above the puny barrier of the mountains, covering the sky from rim to rim—a vast army which alternately smeared out the sun and allowed it to break through the gaps between their brigades. At times they closed into mass formation and drizzled cold scorn down on the impotent hills and the insignificant dwellers therein. Then they drew apart and resumed their indifferent, disorderly route-step across the heavens, perhaps to spit again on the New England mountains farther east and then swing northward to merge into the fogs and snows of bleak Labrador. Even when they passed in straggling groups instead of a long battle-line, they gave the sun scant opportunity to light up the whole countryside at once, as he recently had done. Ever their chill shadows were creeping along the ground, darkening long belts of hill and dale while other strips were agleam with light. Only at night, it seemed, did they draw off into bivouac, leaving the sky clean and clear. Then across the land sped their night-flying ally, Jack Frost.

And with the recurrence of that biting chill the silence of approaching winter fell on the depths of the Traps. At last the katydids were still. So, too, were the crickets. By night, when the music of hammer and drill was hushed and the cheery voices of roosters and hens were silenced by slumber, the stillness would have been painful but for the gentle murmur of Coxing Kill, singing softly to itself as it crept past the humble homes of the hillmen and on into the north. Only a few weeks more, and even the friendly little stream would lose its voice under the merciless grip of winter ice. Then indeed stark silence would hold the great bowl at night—desolate, bitter silence broken only by the sough of wind-beaten evergreens and the groans of cold-tortured hardwoods.

That time was not quite come. But even now the face of the Traps was gaunt and harsh. Gone was the velvety mask of green which had partly hidden the austerity of the land; gone, too, the flaunting colors which had replaced the emerald tone. Through the thinned forest everywhere showed thickly strewn bowlders and the grim barrenness of crag-face and naked rock slope. The vistas through the brush lengthened in all directions. And with this opening of the woods a new, sullen, ominous noise began to shock the quiet air from time to time—the sulphurous explosion of gunpowder.

Thus far, the guns of the Traps had been noticeably silent. Only at long intervals had one spoken. So dense was the undergrowth that the Trapsmen, knowing they had little chance of sighting game, had

almost entirely refrained from hunting. But now the deep roar of muzzle-loading shotguns smashed the stillness early and late, varied occasionally by the blunt bang of some black-powder rifle. Mother Nature, hitherto the protectress of her feathered and furred children, now was betraying them into the hands of men. All hunted things moved with increasing peril.

Yes, all hunted things—human as well as animal. Hunted men, and the friends of those men traversing the brush in furtive missions, were concealed but thinly now by the leafless branches. And while most of the hunters prowling the wilds were seeking only meat and sport, there were also those who stalked more dangerous game.

Three of them, there were. But they did not work together. In fact, one of the three avoided the others, who worked always as a pair. Yet their separate trails crossed at times, and at such times there was a verbal fencing, a give-and-take of half-humorous banter with an undertone of menace. Hammerless Hampton, free ranger, hunter of Snake Sanders and silent partner of Steve, outfaced or outmanœuvred Ward and Bill, who also sought Snake but whose more important quarry was that same Steve—and who, consequently, scrutinized Hampton's movements at every opportunity.

"When we git somethin' on you, Hampton, we'll gather you right in," Ward reiterated in sardonic humor. To which Douglas, with devil-may-care smile, would reply: "All right. But it'll take both of you to do it. How's business?"

"Oh, pickin' up all the time," with a carelessness that might or might not be assumed. "We know about where one of our guys is hangin' out, but we'll let him lay until we git to talk to the other one a little. We're gittin' a good vacation, and we ain't in any rush."

How much of this ambiguous answer was true Douglas could not tell. And, suspecting that it was purposely phrased to evoke questions from him, he made no queries as to which of the "guys" was being spared while the other was sought. Nor did he ever allow his eyes to stray in the direction of Steve's subterranean cavern; he knew Ward was subtly tempting him to give some involuntary indication of his knowledge of the fugitive's retreat, and he gave none. He observed with misgiving, however, that the pair now seemed always to be somewhere near Dickie Barre.

Ward's half-jest about the "vacation," though, seemed to hold much of truth. He looked like the instinctive outdoorsman, who really would derive much pleasure from working in rough country. Certainly both he and Bill showed the good effects of open-air life: the city sleekness of flesh and redness of face were gone, and they were more lean of frame, more lithe of movement, brown of skin and clear of eye. Bill still wore the sour look which seemed habitual, and toward Hampton he always maintained a grouchy silence—perhaps because he knew he would get the worst of any verbal encounter. But, from the physical standpoint, there could be little doubt of his ability to hold

his own with almost any one. He and his mate now were a formidable combination.

"If it's not a sassy question, how do you fellows manage to live in here?" Douglas wondered at one of their unexpected meetings. "Shouldn't think you'd find it easy to get food and shelter."

"Oh, that's easy. We've got a little shelter of our own, where nobody'll bat us over the dome when we're sleepin'. And for grub, we have a wagon that comes up every so often from down below; meets us outside, and we pack in the fodder. Anything else you want to know?"

"Sure. How much longer are you staying?"

"Till we git our man, of course. Do I have to keep tellin' you? It's takin' a little longer than we thought, but we'll be here as long as he is."

The quiet determination of the tone stirred Hampton's admiration despite himself.

"You ought to be on the Royal Northwest Mounted," he laughed. "You have the same stick-to-the-trail doggedness."

"I was with 'em," was the unexpected reply. "Five years ago. Up in Alberta. Too much snow. Too much horse. Too lonesome. But I know what stickin' on the trail means, yeah. This here stuff is nothin' but play, lined up alongside of some things I seen."

The simple statement was a revelation to Douglas. Bill of Brooklyn, if left to himself, would have quit in disgust before now. But Ward, former R. N. W. M. P., would never abandon his quest until officially called in—or unofficially shot. He would imperturb-

ably stick until the coming of the snows should make it impossible for any one to carry food to Steve without leaving a trail. And with the laying of that trail he would run his man to earth in no time. The sky suddenly looked very black for Steve.

But the blond man strove to keep his thoughts out of his face, and after a few more words he passed on, cudgeling his brain for some means of helping the fugitive to evade the remorseless power creeping closer and closer to his covert. A number of ways had previously occurred to him, but none of them was feasible in view of Steve's own refusal to leave his native environment, his determination to die first "like a wolf—into the rocks or the trees." Against that immovable decision what could he do? Nothing.

Nothing except the thing he now was trying to do—corner Snake Sanders. If cornered, Sanders might possibly be forced to clear Steve. The hope was slim, but still there was a chance—*if* he could corner Sanders! The thought revolved on itself and maddened him with its futility. The man Sanders was still eluding him, and, despite Ward's nonchalance, undoubtedly was evading the officers also. And the telltale snow which must reveal Steve's refuge might come at any time now.

Through Marion, he knew that the earth-bound boy had fought off his lung-pains and was somewhat stronger, though by no means well. For the present, therefore, he was not worrying over the youth's condition. In fact, he had asked himself a couple of times why he should take so deep an interest in the

fellow anyway; then he had left the question unanswered, merely telling himself that "the poor kid's in hard luck, and he'd do as much for me—maybe." He had not faced squarely the fact that the basic motive for his sympathy was his desire to aid the girl.

He had seen her several times since the death of the ha'nt, but only for short periods. Her mother, he learned, still was bitter against him, and—as perhaps might have been expected from one of her type—persisted in putting on him some of the blame for the death of her "man." Marion herself, though frankly asserting that she had no patience with such an attitude, was pensive and rather reserved in manner. Therefore he refrained from unnecessary calls.

She had asked him, of course, about his success in hunting the ha'nt; indeed, she had shown unmistakable relief when he rambled into her yard the next day to ask whether "Spit got home all right." In pursuance of his decision to keep hidden for the present the annihilation of Dalton's Death, he had answered evasively, telling her truth but not all of the truth: that Spit had torn madly about in an effort to escape, that the door had swung open later on and the cat had run out, that he himself had tired of watching and fallen asleep on his blankets. "And you can see for yourself," he concluded, "that nothing gobbled me."

And since then he had been steadily seeking Sanders. He had changed his hunting-ground now from the vicinity of Snake's shack to a section nearer his own house—the long wall of Dickie Barre. Thither he had

been led by an idea of his own, and there he worked day after day with a grim persistence equalling that of Ward and Bill, coupled with a methodical thoroughness which they might well have emulated.

The germ of his idea was the recollection of his first meeting with Steve and of Marion's production of the jug which, she said, belonged to Snake. She had not gone far that morning to get that jug. So, starting from the well-remembered crack among the bowlders where his camp had been, he now delved into every crevice and cavern within a radius of a few minutes' traveling time from that focal point.

He found snakes, but none with legs. In one gloomy passageway leading inward he was halted by a rustle among leaves just ahead. His ears telling him that the sound was too slight to be made by stealthily moving feet, he hazarded the light of a match—and found himself in a den of copperheads. The deadly reptiles had abandoned the well-watered lower lands and sought higher ground to bed themselves down for the coming winter, and now they lay in a sluggish knot, nearly buried among the leaves. Their lifted heads and unwinking stare, however, showed that they were by no means too numb to attack; and Douglas, though well booted to the knee, had no desire to tread among them. Moreover, the presence of the reptiles and the untrodden appearance of the leaves virtually proved that no man was beyond. Wherefore he withdrew.

In other recesses farther north he found, at times, evidence of the occasional visits of men, clandestine or otherwise; the mute testimony of charred fagots

and smutted stone, of scrapes on rock and of indentations showing that weighty things had stood for some time in certain spots. These traces, however, all indicated bygone activities, not recent occupancy. Whatever had been carried on in those crevices and culs-de-sac, both the equipment and the products now had vanished. Whether the evanishment was due to the fact that the Law still prowled about was a question which did not concern the silent hunter. He was looking for a man, one man; and, not finding that man or his lair, he moved on without delay.

Then came an unexpected impetus to his search. One afternoon, as he was threading his way around a bulk of detritus which obviously contained no opening, a drab figure detached itself from a massive tree-trunk near at hand. He looked into the foxy face of the little cooper, David McCafferty.

"Jest a-layin' for a couple o' squir'ls," Davy explained his presence. "Havin' any luck?"

"Not yet. I'm hunting—snakes."

A shrewd nod and a glance around followed. In a hoarse whisper the barrel-maker informed him: "I hearn ther's a bad one—wust one round here—been seen down 'long here a piece. Mebbe 'bout haff a mile or so down. I dunno nothin' 'bout it. But ther' might be somethin' into it."

With another quick look around, he retreated to his tree. Douglas, without trying to render unwanted thanks, waved a hand and went on. A little later he heard behind him two roaring gunshots, and hoped Davy had bagged both his squirrels.

He did not, however, swing away through the woods for an estimated half-mile and there resume his conning of the crags. Davy's directions had been too indefinite, and he was determined not to leave an unexplored gap in his steadily lengthening line. His system was to cover as much ground as he could in each short day, leaving some sort of marker at the point where twilight compelled him to cease, then return to that marker the next morning and do another section. Thus, though his progress through the welter of stone was necessarily slow, he was making it absolutely sure. And now he held himself to the deliberate course he had set.

When the dusk descended he had laboriously made certain that Sanders' hide-hole, if he had one along here, was somewhere to the north of a buttress-jut beside which he had stopped. After fixing that outcrop firmly in memory and lightly blazing a couple of beech saplings with his pocket-knife for reassurance the next morning, he swung down through the brush to the road and home to his cheerless house.

"Ho-hum!" he yawned over his after-supper pipe. "I'm beginning to sympathize with Ward. Hunting down a man in this old Indian stronghold is real work. If it weren't for Davy's tip to-day I'd begin to think Snake was dead somewhere, like Nigger Nat. But there's no such luck. Well, Snake, maybe to-morrow night I'll know more about you."

The vague hope was to become terrible truth. To-morrow night he would know much more about Snake Sanders—including something which would stagger the entire Traps.

CHAPTER XXV

NINETY-NINE'S MINE

HAMMERLESS HAMPTON stood very still.

Once more he was among the rocks. But these grotesque bulks around him were new; he never had penetrated into this group before. In fact, but for his careful observation of every opening he would not be here now. He had spied a hole in what seemed to be the solid precipice, beyond which showed light instead of the usual gloom. Crawling through, he had found himself in a big space whose existence was concealed by the false face of the cliff. It was one of the freaks of the long-vanished glaciers, perhaps, moving outward a long line of solid stone and leaving beyond it a big gouge in the real butte. At any rate, it was queer.

But this was not what held Douglas so quiet; he had long since ceased to marvel at the fantastic formations along his line of exploration. Now, after passing among a number of small bowlders—that is, no larger than a three-room house—he stood beside a hole opening downward. And beside that hole lay several charred matches.

In his mind those tiny stubs loomed larger than the long wall itself. Some man had been here quite recently: at some time since the latest rain, which would have pelted those cylindrical sticks down along the

sloping stones on which they lay. And that man was no hunter, for no hunter would ever bother to enter this barren box. Indeed, no hunter would even find it, for he would be scanning ground and branches, not the naked rock-face.

Warily the discoverer glanced at the corners of the surrounding stones. No spying eye met his; no half-hidden head moved. He looked down again at the opening.

It was a hole made by the uptilting of a once horizontal slab. It was near the true face of the butte. At some time, perhaps not long distant, a mass of overhanging stone had crashed down from above, a jutting segment striking this slab at one end and angling the other end upward and aside by the force of impact. Before then, the horizontal block had been a sort of trap-door, concealing the cavity beneath. Now, plain to any eye which should reach this place, the opening revealed a few flat stones leading downward, markedly resembling crude stairs.

Across Hampton's face shot a sudden startled look —the astounded incredulity of a skeptic beholding in solid actuality a thing which he had believed to be mere legend. For minutes he stood as if hypnotized by the gloom below. Then, recovering himself, he stepped very quietly into a position where he could obtain a more direct view of the descent.

He saw little more. The steps vanished into the blackness of a vault. What lay beyond could be determined only by exploration. Exploration meant light; and, barring the few matches he always carried,

he had no means of illumination. Moreover, he felt issuing from the depths a draught which probably would kill the feeble match-flames before they could reveal anything worth seeing. He must return to the house and bring up his gas-lamp.

But then, moving again, he caught a glint from down the steps—a glint of metal. Logic told him that the other man who came here must have used those matches in lighting a lantern. If that faintly shining thing down there was it, then the man must be away at present. He stole closer, straining his eyes—then stepped boldly forward. There was little doubt now that he saw the circular top of a cheap oil lantern, and he believed he could also make out the dull-colored wire bail.

With some difficulty he folded himself up enough to crouch under the tilted lid and begin descent. After a couple of steps he could move more easily, and by the time he reached the lantern he was erect again. Lifting the lantern, he shook it and frowned. The light swash at the bottom told him that the oil was almost exhausted.

If a large cave lay beyond, he would have to be careful not to go too far from the entrance. Left lightless, he might find himself in a desperate plight. Even as the thought passed through his mind there came to his ears a faint gurgle of subterranean waters. Yes, he must watch his step, and his flame too. But he would see what he could.

Two matches were extinguished by the damp draught as he sought to light the blackened wick. The

third, however, communicated its flame to the oily weave, and the snapping down of the sooty chimney preserved the dim shine within. Unlike the owner of the lantern, Douglas did not leave his match-stubs where they fell. He gathered them up and dropped them into a pocket.

Gun ready, he stole on downward. There were perhaps a dozen more of the steps, not one of which was truly horizontal; all sloped in one direction or another, and no two were of the same height. Some were so poorly balanced that they rocked under him, and all evidently had been piled in by unskilled human hands, long ago. But Douglas, cat-footed from his daily experience among the bowlders, passed down them as easily as if they had been a marble staircase constructed by expert workmen. They terminated on a downgrade of damp, hard earth.

The passage led on, narrow but fairly straight, for quite a distance. All at once it broadened out. At the same time the blackness became noticeably less dense. Faintly, here and there, showed grim rock walls—mere patches of stone, vague in the farther gloom, revealed by wan daylight filtering through some crevices high up and opening eastward. Simultaneously the hollow gurgle of the running water increased in volume. It sounded somewhere beyond.

A moment Douglas stood there, straining his eyes, seeing little. The dim lantern-light seemed to hinder rather than to help, preventing his pupils from dilating to the full width which might have brought more of the place into view. He felt an impulse to extinguish

it. But it would go out of its own accord all too soon; perhaps if he did blow out the flame the wick would refuse to take a new light. He let it burn, and began moving about.

Before he moved far, however, he retraced his steps and spread on the uneven floor his handkerchief. Three corners of the cloth he folded in to the center, leaving the fourth protruding in a white angle toward the entrance. With this marker in place he advanced again, watching the dirt for any yawning crack, pausing to look around, then resuming his way. After a little while he reached the farther wall, having found nothing. There he halted.

The light-crevices were plain enough now—mere cracks in the stone, back whence he had come, from twenty to thirty feet up. Off to his left sounded the rumbling of the water: an eerie, gruesome noise unlike the gentle murmur of Coxing Kill; a gargling and choking, as if some inhuman monster were gulping at an unseen Styx. Before he could decide whether to go and look at it, something to the right caught and held his gaze—a shadowy, shapeless thing which gave the impression of solidity but not of stone. He worked toward it.

As he approached, it took on form and outline—a confusion of ancient timbers and rock-chunks which seemed to be a tumble-down furnace, or something of the kind. Just what it might have been he could not determine at once: but it certainly was a work-place, and very old.

His toes stubbed on something. The lantern proved

the obstruction to be the remains of a heavy hammer, half eaten away by rust. As he moved again, his lantern-light glinted dully on metal not far from the ruined forge—if forge it was. His interest quickened. Metal not dimmed by rust—what was it?

Stepping toward it, he stumbled again. A heavy, dull-colored obstacle on the dirt had blocked his feet. It was not especially large, but it certainly was solid, as his tingling toes testified. It seemed to be a rudely shaped bar of metal. And it was not rusty.

"Great guns!" he breathed. "Is it true? Silver? Tarnished silver?"

As he stared at it, it began to grow dim. Was it about to vanish into the ground like a legendary treasure? No, it was not sinking; it was still there; but ——

The light was going out.

The little flame had shrunk. It still was shrinking. Angrily he shook the lantern. A thin—very thin—slosh of oil answered him. There was still a little fuel —enough to last several minutes, at least. But the wick must be short.

The shaking gave a brief respite. The flame revived a trifle, feeding on the oil-dregs thrown on the wick. Swiftly he stepped toward the glimmering thing he had first seen. It was on the floor, and beside it rose a number of those solid bars, piled like wood. It was a tin can, recently emptied.

After one glance at it he pushed rapidly on toward the outer wall, determined to see as much as possible by the last light in the lantern. He found still more

of those bars, and, beyond them, something made much more recently: a thick, comfortable bed of leaves, on which lay open a coarse, dirty quilt. Beside this, at what seemed to be the head of the primitive couch, and within easy reach of a man resting there, stood a big jug. Somehow it looked familiar. Its nozzle was plugged with a stout corn-cob, and—yes, on one side was an old smear of green paint!

"Thought so," nodded Douglas.

Memory was depicting a bygone morning among the rocks to the south; a red-haired girl, a gaunt-faced youth, a jug which the girl declared to be the property of Snake Sanders—a jug bearing the same green splotch. Its presence here was conclusive evidence.

All was growing dusky again. The light was going for the last time. It was no longer a flame, but a mere sunken line, turning blue; and from the spent wick rose a warning reek. With a shake that made the foul globe chatter angrily within its wires, he turned and gripped one of the cold metal bars. For its size, it was astoundingly heavy. He had meant to carry it under one arm, but its sullen weight and clammy slipperiness forced him to hug it in both. With bar and gun both cradled across his body and lantern dangling crazily from one finger, he moved for the exit.

It seemed to be nearer than he had thought. The last flickers of the expiring light revealed a black gouge in the wall. Into it he turned, muttering to the lantern: "All right, quit! I don't need you any more."

The overworked wick did quit, leaving him in utter

blackness. Half a dozen more steps he took, watching for the first vague dayshine from beyond. Then he halted as if petrified. He remembered his handkerchief. And he remembered that he had not seen it on turning in here.

Carefully he lowered his burden. With hands free, he struck a match.

"Wow! You can back-track, Mister Man!" he muttered.

Less than a yard ahead opened a wide rift in the floor. One more step in the dark would have trapped him in a pit where death, swift or slow, would inevitably have obliterated him; death from the fall, from starvation, or from Snake Sanders' merciless hands.

"Yes, you can back-track," he repeated. "Wouldn't Snake have a lovely afternoon with you if he found you in there, all busted up? He'd drop in a few of his squirmy chums to keep you company, most likely, and have the time of his life watching the show. And if he didn't find you, nobody else ever would. Now use your brains, Hamp, if you have any, and find the right way out."

Conning the situation, he realized that the most important feature was saving matches, of which he had very few. Therefore he groped until he had located bar, gun, and lantern; gathered them up, turned carefully, and felt his way back by keeping an elbow against the rough wall of the false passage. When the stone ended he halted again, laid down everything, lit another fire-stick, and, carefully shielding the flame

from draught, advanced to the left. As he walked he counted his steps.

Three matches in turn burned out. The third, however, brought him within sight of a white splotch several feet to his left. The fourth proved it to be his pointer.

He now had only two matches left. But he knew the number of steps, including the turn he had made toward his handkerchief: he had the vague crevice-lights to aid his calculations for the return, and he had approximately the right direction in mind. Deducting from his total count the few steps taken on the last angle, and concentrating every sense into the task of traveling straight, he marched back through the darkness. So true was his course that with the last step his foot struck the invisible lantern.

Once more loaded, he sought the exit, saving both matches. But his steps were a trifle shorter now that he was burdened, and he also strayed a little from his line. It took both matches to set him right at the end; the second was almost out before he could even see the white, and before he could reach the marked spot the light was gone. However, he found the opening in the wall; and when he went groping along the passage he had retrieved his handkerchief. The only traces of his visit now were the last two match-butts, which he had had to drop.

The wan light of day had seldom been so welcome as when, after a scraping, stumbling journey, he emerged at length at the crude staircase. With a long breath of relief, he clambered up to the step whereon

he had found the lantern. There he replaced the grimy light-giver on the exact spot where he had discovered it. On upward he continued, and out from under the tilted lid he crept.

No new sign of human presence was visible outside. He strode around the nearest bowlder. Behind its sheltering bulk he laid down his bar of loot and began close inspection of it.

With his clasp-knife he scraped away an accumulation of dark sediment, baring a narrow strip of the true metal. From the clean space shone a dull silvery gleam.

"By thunder!" he breathed. "Sure as shooting, it's —— But wait, now. Let's see."

He dug the point of the strong blade into the metal. Turning it, he easily cut out a conical chunk. After scanning it an instant, he pressed his thumb-nail down on one circular edge. The nail bit out a clean gouge. For a couple of seconds more he stared at the little plug of metal, at his knife-blade, at his nail and the end of his thumb. Then he lifted his head and laughed —silently, but so heartily that tears came to his eyes.

He knew now what it was that the long-dead Ninety-Nine had dug from the bowels of that shadowy cavern; what it was that the Indian who sought the aid of old Elias Fox had borne away from the mine; what the old man's sly glimpse had depicted as virgin silver, and what his son and grandsons since had sought until crushing doom annihilated one of them. His laughter ended as he eyed the great block whose fall from above had pried up the stone trap-door.

That might be the very mass which had hurtled down on Will Fox. Under it even now might be lying his splintered bones.

Dubiously he eyed the cliff above, half dreading another such fall. But there was no overhang of stone now, no danger of another drop. He let his thoughts run back again.

Long ago he had perceived the flaw in the tradition that "where the sun first strikes the wall, there is the mine." The sun, moving north or south with the changing seasons, would cast its first beams on different points of the wall at varying times of year. Even when he had climbed the Mohonk slope to see the sun rise he had been aware of this; and since then he had relegated the whole story to the realm of myths. Yet the mine was real enough, and he had found it at last; and, through his good-humored promise to Lou Brackett, part of it belonged to her.

But Snake, Lou's own man, had found it before him. This was why he had been so elusive of late; this was where he had been most of the time, evading all eyes and perhaps working to get more mineral from the vein. Was it likely that he would share his secret with Lou? Hardly. Perhaps he intended soon to drive her from him, and hoped—the thinker's face hardened—hoped with his new-found wealth to gain possession of Marion.

The thought brought him to his feet. Where was Snake now? What was he doing? Was all well down below? But then, as if in answer, arose the vision of glacial gray eyes and the echo of ominously quiet

words: "Pop's gun—I got it ready—if Snake comes a-pesterin' round he won't never walk outen our yard!"

The self-reliant girl was well able to defend herself. He need not worry. But he began moving away, leaving behind him the soft silvery bar. One last glance he threw at it, and a hard smile twitched his lips.

"It was a treasure in Indian days," he thought, "and I haven't a doubt that you, Snake, you ignorant reptile, think you're a coming silver king. But you'll never make much money out of those few bars of lead!"

CHAPTER XXVI

SNAKE STRIKES

"SNAKE SANDERS has kilt his woman!"

Aghast, Douglas stood in his dark doorway, staring down into the upturned face of Marion. Around them the dusk was thickening into night, and in the shadow of his porch it was dim indeed; but through the gloom the eloquent gray eyes and the hushed voice spoke the same shocked horror, pity, and wrath that stirred in his own soul.

"Killed her? Killed Lou Brackett?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes. She ain't dead yet, but she can't live long. Poor woman, it'd been a lot better for her if she'd missed that tree—she wouldn't be sufferin' now. But then, there wouldn't be a proof against him if she had. Where you been all day? You must be the only one into the Traps that ain't heard. I was down here twice—I wanted to tell you so's you'd look out. They ain't caught Snake yet, and he might—well, you better watch out."

She turned, sweeping the darkling road with her eyes. Nothing moved there. No sound came, except the doleful sigh of a cold night breeze.

"Come in." He moved back. "I want to know all about this. The fire's going—I was just getting supper. Come in and keep warm."

For an instant she hesitated, instinctively dreading entrance into the sinister house where her father and Jake Dalton had met nameless doom. But then, realizing that Douglas had lived here for weeks without harm, she followed him in. Her moving feet made an unwonted noise on the boards—the patter of leather-heeled shoes, which the gnawing chill had at last compelled her to don. The sombre echo of the sound in the bare room halted her again.

"Ain't you got a light?" she requested. "I—I don't like this place, so dark and holler."

"I'll light up. Take this chair." The one chair in the place came rumbling toward her, and she sank on it as he worked on the lamp. When the white flame was lighting up the room he set the illuminator on the table and turned to her, neglecting to draw the burlap window-curtains which he had made some time ago.

"I was up in the rocks all day," he explained. "Found something, too, that may help to catch Snake. But now tell me all about it."

"Well, this is what I hear, and it's what Lou said her own self after she got so's she could talk. Snake took her up on top the Big Wall last night and throwed her off ——"

"Good God! Threw her off the Wall?"

"That's right. Snake ain't been to home much lately—you know that—but he's come in a few times, and then he was so ugly to her she dasn't go lookin' round to find out where he was when he was away. He told her if she stepped a foot away from the house he'd know about it, and he'd fix her so's she wouldn't

be able to walk or talk any more, and if anybody come a-huntin' him she'd got to say she didn't know where he was, and so on. But last night he come in 'long toward dark, and he was laughin' fit to kill. And he said he'd got an awful good joke onto the detectives.

"She asked him what 'twas, of course, and he wouldn't tell her. But he said he'd show her if she'd hurry up to the top of the Wall. He said the detectives had got into the rocks down under the Wall, and when she could see what they were up to she'd 'most die laughin'. But she'd have to come and see it her own self.

"Well, Lou, she—she ain't very bright, you know. And she was so glad to see him good-natured and so curious about this joke onto the detectives, she went right 'long up there with him. And he went right to the edge and looked round a little, and then he says: 'There! See 'em, right up under here? It's a-gittin' dark down there, but look close and you'll make 'em out. Ain't that funny, now?'

"Lou, she couldn't see anything but rocks. But he kept a-tellin' her she was too far back, so she edged up closer and closer, still a-lookin'. Then all of a sudden she heard Snake laugh again, and he had sneaked behind her, and that laugh scairt her. She looked round quick, and he was grinnin' like death. And before she could move he shoved her off. The murderin' copperhead! He'd brought her up there jest to kill her."

Her fingers, twining and intertwining over one knee

while she talked, gripped hard. Unable longer to sit still, she sprang up.

"D'you know where he is? If you do, git him quick! Lou wasn't a friend to me—she hated me—but he's got to be kilt for what he done! He ——"

"Go on," he broke in. "Tell me all of it. Then I'll see what we can do."

"Yes—yes, that's right. Well, Lou would have been kilt right quick, only for one thing. There was a tree part way down, growin' right off the face of the wall, the way they do sometimes—a hemlock, stickin' out on a slant. And Lou struck right into it. She was fallin' awful fast, and she hit it so hard it—it hurt her terrible; and the tree tore off from the little ledge, and it went 'long down with her. She landed into the rocks, of course. But that tree had stopped her enough so that the rocks didn't kill her.

"She laid there a long time, and when she got her senses back it was all dark. But then a light showed right close by, and what d'you s'pose she saw? Snake! Snake, with an ax into one hand and a lantern into the other, a-lookin' for her!

"He must have seen that tree stop her, and he'd come down through the Gap and worked 'long through the rocks to be sure she was dead. He was a-callin' to her, and sayin' he'd help her, and so on. But she kept dead still. She was into a shadow beside one of the rocks, and he went right by her. She never moved till he quit lookin' and come back, swearin' at her and the dark and everything. And then when she was sure he was gone, she started crawlin'."

She stopped again, her hands clenched. Douglas, visioning that awful scene at the base of the night-bound crags, stood with jaw set. Presently she resumed the tragic narrative.

"I dunno how she could do it, but she did—she crawled down through the rocks and over pretty near to the road. It took her more'n half the night to do it—it was 'most two o'clock into the mornin' when they found her. She couldn't git any further, and she laid there a-cryin' and a-screamin' —— Oh, why does God let a devil like Snake live? Seems like He ain't much good to let sech things be!

"But anyway, there was two fellers out coon-huntin', and the dogs had run a coon up that way, and they found Lou. It was Tom Malley and Joe Weeks—they live 'way 'long on the Paltz road, and they'd drove up this way to hunt. They went and got their wagon and put Lou in and took her down to the Malley place, and while Tom's folks did what they could he put for the doctor, 'way over to Paltz. The doctor, he says she might live a few days, but that's all. She's awful tough, like all the Bracketts—they die hard. But she can't live; she's hurt too bad."

"And she was able to tell about it?"

"Yes, a little to a time. And Missus Malley, Tom's wife, she was sharp enough to have it all wrote down. There's quite a family of 'em, the Malleys, and the oldest boy is quick at writin', folks say; and she made him set there by the bed and write down every word Lou said. The doctor said that was a right smart

thing to do, and the detectives said so too. They didn't have to ask her ——"

"The detectives? Did they go down there?"

"One of 'em did. T'other stayed here. They're both here now. Tom Malley was so mad he drove up here this mornin' and told everybody he come across about it, and he met the detectives, and one of 'em went back with him—the quiet one that don't look so much like a bulldog."

"Ward. He's the brains of the combination. And I suppose nobody else around here is doing anything but talk about it."

"Ain't they? You're the only one, Mister Hammerless Hampton, that ain't! Our fellers are kind of rough, mebbe, some of 'em, but they don't set still after a thing like this! Every gun into the Traps is out after Snake, 'ceptin' yours and mine. And mine's been waitin' for him ever since pop got kilt."

"So has mine," he reminded her. "What are the boys doing?"

"They're a-watchin' every way out of the Traps. They know he ain't gone—they 'most caught him this afternoon, up to his house. He didn't know about Lou bein' alive and found, I s'pose, and he was gittin' his stuff together as if he was goin' somewheres—gun and food and oil and so on —— What would he want oil for, I wonder? Anyway, he skinned out of a back winder when they jumped in at the door. Job Clark shot at him, but he missed, and Snake got into the woods and they lost him. But the house is bein' watched now, and so's every road and trail. He's got

his gun, though, and if you're a-goin' to stay in to-night you'd better lock up tight. He might come and git you. And now I'd better go home."

"Wait. I'll go along with you. But let me figure on this thing first."

For a silent minute or two he fixedly regarded the blank wall. As steadily, she watched him. Soon he nodded.

"That's the best way," he said, half to himself. "I'd like to get him single-handed, but if he should get me instead—nobody else would know where he was hanging out. Yep, I'll take some of the boys with me." Turning his gaze to her, he announced decisively: "By to-morrow noon Snake will be dead or in a trap he can't squirm out of. I found his hole to-day, and as soon as daylight comes I'll get some of the fellows together and we'll bottle him up. No use trying it to-night—I couldn't find the place myself in the dark. But if all the trails are watched he can't go anywhere else, and getting him will be easy. All we have to do is to sit around like a bunch of terriers watching a rat-hole, and when he comes out—nothing to it!"

"Where? Where is it?" she demanded. "Are you sure it's his place? Mebbe—mebbe some of the boys ——"

"No, it's none of the boys," he smiled. "The boys have cleaned up all their places lately—hid everything somewhere, so the detectives wouldn't see too much if they went poking around. And I know this is Snake's place because his jug is there—green paint on one side

—remember? I'll tell you all about it some other time. But now—say, here's an idea! I'll try to get those detectives both up there, and while we know where they are you go to Steve and try to make him leave that cold hole of his and find a better place. If he wants to make a run for it and leave the Traps awhile, nobody'll stop him ——"

A shake of the head negatived his budding plan.

"He won't run, and he won't change, and he won't listen to sense," she declared. "He's more set and wild than ever now. He's got to git Snake, he says, 'fore somebody else does. I hadn't ought to told him, mebbe. But I did tell him—I went to him jest now and told him 'bout Lou and all. I jest got back from there—I ain't even been home yet. I wish I'd kept still. He's crazy as a coot. He swore he'd come out and git Snake his own self, detectives or no detectives, and he'd take pop's gun to do it with. I had an awful time quietin' him down. He's sick again, too —his lung's bad some more."

"Good Lord! Sick again?"

"Yes, sick again. He looks awful bad. I dunno if he —— But I'd better git 'long home. He's so wild about Snake he might come and git that gun, sick or no sick."

"But you said you quieted him down."

"Mebbe I did. I hope so. I told him he couldn't have that gun 'cause I had to have it my own self, and that made him shut up. But he wouldn't promise to stay where he was—he wouldn't say yes or no or nothin'. And he's so bull-headed when he gits

his mind set, he might —— Well, I'm a-goin'. G'by."

As she turned doorward, he stopped her with a swiftly formed decision.

"Just a minute more, Marion. I'm going with you, as I said before; and I'm going to stay. My job to-night is going to be standing guard at your house. Then you and your mother can get a good sound sleep. It isn't Steve I'm thinking about—it's Snake. If he intends to call on anybody to-night it's more likely to be on you than on me. So if you don't mind my sitting on your steps ——"

The sentence never was finished. Nor was the plan ever carried out.

As Douglas turned to step toward his hat, coat, and gun, the front door jumped inward.

Snake Sanders, shotgun leveled at his hip, evil face aflame, stood in the room.

CHAPTER XXVII

TRAPPED

SWIFT and sudden as was the appearance of that murderous figure, it was little quicker than the movements of Douglas and Marion.

For one fleeting second the pair stood as if petrified. For the same time Snake halted as if blinded. Coming from the outer dark, he had sprung straight into the brightest beam of the gas lamp, which happened to be centered on the doorway. The shock to his optic nerves was too great to be overcome at once even by the instinctive narrowing of his lids. He wavered aside, trying to dodge the sight-searing ray without taking his gaze from the man he hated and the girl he coveted.

Simultaneously the trapped pair leaped.

Douglas lunged toward his own gun—and tripped over the forgotten low chair. Marion sprang between him and the menacing muzzles which jerked to cover him anew.

"Don't you!" she screamed. "Don't you dast shoot!"

The clatter of the overturned chair and the thump of a solid blow terminated her words. Douglas, unable to regain his balance, had pitched headlong against the stove. The impact dazed him. He fumbled, strove to rise on legs that seemed useless.

Snake's venomous face split in a lethal grin. With a hissing laugh he sidestepped, jumped forward, snapped the gun-stock to his shoulder.

CRASH!

Buckshot cannoned toward the groggy man reeling up from the floor.

But the frightful charge of leaden death missed. With the muzzle less than six feet from its victim—it missed. It smashed through a window. The bellowing shock of the discharge roared out into the silent night, reverberating far along the crag-girt Traps.

Marion had leaped again. With the lightning speed of a maddened catamount she had struck at the gun, knocking it aside just as the hammer fell. Now she was gripping the twin barrels in both her strong young hands, wrenching and yanking in a furious effort to wrest the weapon from its owner.

"Leggo!" snarled Snake. "Leggo, ye red cat!"

"I won't—I got you now—Douglas!—Git him!"

She strained in frenzy, jerking, twisting—but ever keeping the muzzles pointed upward.

Stunned anew by the concussion so near his head, Douglas did not hear her panted command. Nor did his numbed brain turn him of his own accord toward his shotgun. Though he had carried that weapon habitually of late, he was not a born gun-fighter; and now, in his foggy condition, he acted only by primitive instinct. But he was acting. He had regained his feet, seizing the upturned chair as he rose; and now he was lurching forward, poising the chair for a crushing down-blow.

With a louder snarl Snake heaved himself backward, dodging away from the oncoming menace and swinging up his gun with all his power, striving to break the girl's hold. But she hung on. Lifted clear of the floor, still she hung on. And Douglas, his senses quickening every instant, pressed in faster and harder.

"Got you!" Marion gasped. "Right into the house —where you—kilt my pop ——"

Smash!

Glass shattered. Through the side window licked a length of dull steel. Douglas almost collided with it. He halted. It was another gun-barrel. And it covered Snake and Marion.

"Marry!" crackled a harsh voice. "Git 'way! He's mine!"

Behind the cocked hammers of the gun glimmered a white face: a drawn, haggard face dominated by hollow eyes in which gleamed cold ferocity.

"Git 'way! Git back! Leggo that 'ere gun! I'm a-shootin'!" came the ice-edged voice again. But the commands ended in a cough, followed by a choked moan of pain. The muzzles wavered. Then they steadied again.

That voice, that face, that gun, seemed to freeze Snake. Fear shot athwart his contorted visage. His arms turned limp. Marion, feet again on the floor, hands still desperately clutching the steel, flashed a glance at the window, another at Snake—and tore the gun from his relaxing fingers. An instant too late he snatched for it. It was gone from him, and its muz-

zles—one impotent, but the other deadly—were four feet away, yawning at his face.

"Good gal!" A freezing chuckle sounded at the shattered frame. "Don't ye kill him less'n he jumps—he's mine! I got to talk to him a minute 'r so, an' then —— Hamp, shove up the winder! I'm a-comin' in."

"Can't, Steve," Douglas replied mechanically. "Never could get this sash up. It's warped solid. Come around."

The fierce face hung in the dimness a moment longer before it moved. Then, reluctantly: "Aw-right, if I gotta I gotta. But ye watch him close! He's a snake—if he moves bust him!"

As the barrel withdrew Snake darted desperate glances at the pair. He saw a tense, ready girl, flame-haired, flame-eyed, holding him at bay like an angel of vengeance; a grim-jawed man who once before had knocked him senseless, who had been relentlessly trailing him for many days, who now stood alert and all too eager to avenge three attempts on his life. But if he could only dodge that one barrel and dive through the window ——

"Don't try it!" the hard voice of Hammerless Hampton warned. "If she should miss you I wouldn't! I'm only holding off because you're Steve's meat. Make one little move and ——"

The threat of the hovering chair was all too plain.

Snake licked his thin lips, shot a look doorward—then shrank back as if trying to merge himself with the unyielding wall. A moment ago he had plumbed

the hot eyes of Wrath. Now he looked into the stony countenance of Revenge.

Steve was in the room. Steve, born like a wolf, wild as a wolf, now was merciless as a wolf. Through his matted black hair his cavernous eyes glared in concentrated hate; across his bristle-bearded mouth stretched a fang-toothed grin; in his creeping step was the stiffness of a timber-wolf about to leap and rend. At his hip hung the battered double gun of dead Nigger Nat, hammers back like the heads of striking serpents, triggers tense under wasted fingers, muzzles slipping with nerve-shattering slowness toward the vitals of the cornered betrayer and murderer. So appalling was the utter ferocity of that shambling figure that Marion's face paled and her weapon sank, while even Douglas felt ice crawl down his spine.

"Three year!" the avenger rasped through his teeth. "Three year I done for ye! I'd 'a' died, only I swored I'd git ye, Snake—I'd git ye 'spite o' bars an' walls an' guards an' all hell! An' now's yer time to pay! Ye're gone!"

Snake's face writhed again. Desperately he strove to avert his doom.

"Steve, ye're wrong! I tried to git ye clear ——"

"Shet up! Ye dirty liar! Ye ——"

"But wait, for Gawd's sakes! Gimme a chance to tell ye! Ye was drunk that night—ye was wild—crazy—I couldn't handle ye. Ye got 'way from me. Fust I knowed, the place was a-burnin' an' ye a-shootin'—I resked my own life a-tryin' to git ye 'way—don't ye mind me a-haulin' ye down the road an'

the Bumps a-shootin' after us an' how ye tumbled sudden? I thought they'd hit ye, kilt ye, an' I had to look out for myself then. Mebbe ye don't 'member—ye was so drunk ——"

"Ye lie! I was drunk—ye got me drunk a-purpose—but I can 'member better'n ye think I can. Drinkin' never makes me crazy: it makes me sleepy: but a thing that happens when I'm drunk stays clear into my head when I'm sober ag'in. Ye can't wiggle out, ye p'ison varmint! I'm a-shootin' right quick. But fust ye got to tell me how ye kilt Nat. Wha'd ye do to him? Speak up, blast ye!"

"I never!" Snake's voice rose to a scream. "I never! Last I see o' Nat that night he was a-trompin' round the road crazy drunk. I was Nat's friend—I been your friend—I'm here now 'cause I'm friends with all the Oakses! Lookit that feller Hampton! He's yer wust enemy! He set the 'tectives onto ye—he tolled Marry into this 'ere house to-night—he's a-gittin' her 'way from ye—he's doin' ye dirt to every turn!"

The desperate play to distract Steve's attention almost succeeded. It was a diabolical stroke at the hard-bitten youth's innate distrust of outsiders and at his jealousy. So unexpected was it that for an instant Douglas and Marion stood staring blankly; and Steve, brain aflame, nearly turned to confront them. Had he done so, Snake could have jumped, shoved him toward Marion, and sprung out of the door before either of the guns—or the chair, which Douglas had lowered—could stop him.

But he did not quite succeed. Steve's eyes turned, but the deadly muzzles did not swing more than an inch. Then, just as a sinuous quiver of forthcoming action ran through Snake, eyes and muzzles darted back at him. Simultaneously Douglas stepped forward with fists clenched and Marion with gun lifted.

"Hold up a minute, Steve," Douglas requested ominously. "I owe him one for that. You, Snake! Step out and put up your hands!"

"Don't you!" the girl rebuked him. "He's a-tryin' a trick! Steve, it's all lies! I've got a good mind to kill him my own self. But I ain't a-goin' to, and don't you shoot him neither. What good will it do to ——"

"I been waitin' three year! What ye think—I'll let him loose now?" A harsh cackle followed—ending in another of those involuntary moans. Steve lurched slightly. His face drew even tighter. "Keep off, the both o' ye!" he gasped.

"Make him tell the truth!" Douglas shot back. "Give him to the officers—they'll get the truth out of him—the truth that will clear you! Don't you see? You won't have to hide any more then. You'll never have to go back to the pen. And he'll get what's coming to him for murdering Lou. If you shoot him he never can clear you—the law will be after you all your life! Are you going to kill your own chances? Don't be a fool!"

His rapid counsel stayed Steve's fingers even as they tightened on the triggers. So set on personal and deadly vengeance had the youth been that the thought of making his betrayer rehabilitate him with the Law

had never occurred to him. Even now the idea made but slow headway against his fixed mania for revenge. But he held his fire, letting the dazzling possibility grow in his mind.

"That's what I was tryin' to tell you, Steve," seconded Marion. "He can't talk if you kill him! Now you git away—we'll give him to the detectives—you git back to the cave and stay there till we tell you to come out ——"

Snake broke in. He had been squinting wildly at Douglas.

"Lou? Ye say I kilt Lou? I never! She—she fell offen the Wall—I didn't have nothin' to do with it —she got dizzy ——"

All at once his eyes widened, looking beyond them. Douglas half turned, then forced his gaze back, suspecting a trick. But it was no ruse. Quiet footsteps sounded at the rear of the room. Then spoke a cool, authoritative voice.

"Stand still, everybody. Don't try anything sudden. We'll take charge of this thing now."

Three heads jerked around. Snake still stared. From the obscurity of Douglas' sleeping-room had issued two men who now advanced watchfully, right hands under their coats. They were Ward and Bill.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN ACCOUNT IS CLOSED

From the surprise of seeing those dreaded detectives two men recovered quickest—Douglas, who had no fear of them; and Snake, who had every fear of them.

Marion and Steve seemed frozen. Their guns had swerved from Snake's body. The door still stood open, and between officers and criminal stood three people. Snake broke for freedom.

But Douglas had thought of that. Hardly had he glimpsed the officers when he swung back. At Snake's first move he sprang.

Snake reached the doorway. But he went no farther. With the all-concealing darkness before his eyes—something struck him. An arm swooped under his jaw, yanking fiercely back on his throat. A knee smote the small of his back, numbing his legs. A savage fist crashed under his right ear. He collapsed.

Still holding his throat-lock, Douglas dragged him back to the middle of the room and flung him down with a thud that jarred the whole house.

"Here he is," he said curtly. "Now grill him."

"Good eye, Hampton," Ward approved, smiling grimly. "We couldn't git to him with these kids in the way. Guess you got a whole lot of satisfaction out of that wallop, huh?"

"A whole lot!" Douglas nodded, opening and shutting his right fist. "Now you —— Steve! Quit that!"

The refugee, his wolfish teeth bared, was slowly backing doorward, his gun now covering the hated trailers.

"Yeah!" snarled Bill, reaching backward again. "Put that gun down and freeze right where y'are! We wantcha, my fine boid!"

"Ye ain't got me," came the hoarse answer. "An' ye don't git me! Ye pull that gun o' yourn an' ye won't never shoot! I got ye cold!"

It was deadly truth, and Bill knew it. One twitch of the fingers, and he would be a riddled corpse. But he was brave enough. With his long-sought quarry at last before him, he did not shrink from the cold muzzles as he once had from the hammerless gun in Marion's hands, up the road.

"Ya got one chanst," he growled. "Put that gun down and wait while we sweat this guy. If he comes acrost ya'll be free. If ya shoot I'll git ya before I hit the floor."

"And so will I," Ward coolly added. "Show some sense! We're givin' you a square deal. Now if you're guilty as charged, try makin' your getaway. If you ain't, stick around. This guy here is goin' to talk."

Marion also, who had been tensely watching the pair, turned on the gaunt fugitive.

"Steve, you heard what he said," she challenged, looking him straight in the eyes. "If you shoot or run it'll show you *did* burn out the Bumps! I want to

know my own self whether you did or not. You better stay here."

Through a silent pause Steve stood slit-eyed, studying his foes: the men who had hounded him so long, and the one who had caused that hounding. Snake was reviving. He was staring blankly upward. On him the hunted youth's gaze fixed. Slowly he let his weapon sink.

"Ye keep offen me," he warned. "I ain't a-runnin'. But I'm a-keepin' my gun. I'm a-stayin' right where I be. Don't ye come nigh me!"

"That's good enough," consented Ward, after a shrewd look. "You stay right there. Now everybody shut up. I want to talk to this guy Sanders."

In an undertone, however, he said to Douglas: "Kid looks sick and off his nut. Is he?"

"Sick, yes. Lungs. May be pneumonia," was the muttered reply. Ward frowned. Then he snapped at Snake.

"You, Sanders! Git up and talk turkey! We've got you dead to rights. No lies, now!"

Snake, sitting up, dizzily eyed each hard face.

"Wha—wha'd ye want?" he muttered thickly.

"Stand up! Back against that wall! Come on, move! And don't pull any gay stuff. You got some explainin' to do, and the less wigglin' and dodgin' you try the better off you'll be. Understand?"

Snake got up, looking confused. The other three also glanced in a puzzled way at the officers. Here was a murderer, condemned by the revelations of the woman whom he had hurled to her doom; why did

they not drag him out forthwith? They acted as if they only meant to question him, and then, perhaps, let him go.

But Douglas, studying Ward, felt that the man-hunter knew what he was about, and said nothing. Marion and Steve, too, kept silence. Sanders slouched against the blank inner wall designated by Ward.

"Now git this in your head, first off," Ward said crisply. "We've been in here quite awhile. We've been learnin' a lot—about *you*. It'll do you no good to try any lyin'. You come clean, and you may save a lot of trouble all around. Know what I mean?"

Snake nodded dubiously, but with hope beginning to glimmer in his shifting eyes. Douglas saw light. This assumption of omniscience and of infallibility in detecting falsehood, this intimation that full confession would benefit the prisoner—these were part of the stock-in-trade of policedom, as the ex-newspaperman well knew. They formed both a wordless threat and an unexpressed promise: absolutely non-committal, yet subtly potent.

"Well, then, what about this lad? Did he do that burnin' and shootin', or did you? Remember he's right here, listenin' to what you say. Bill, move over a little. Sanders, you look the kid right in the eye. Now then! What about it?"

As Bill, hovering ready at Sanders' left, drew back, Snake turned unwillingly and looked at Steve. The youth made no movement, spoke no word; but his glittering eyes bored into Snake's inmost being. Under that baleful glare, under the chill scrutiny of four

other pairs of eyes, the yellow soul of Sanders shriveled. He quailed visibly. Shifting his gaze, he encountered again the piercing orbs of Ward.

"I—done—it," he whispered.

"You did," Ward repeated clearly. "All right. That's the stuff, Sanders, tell it straight. Now just tell the whole thing—why you did it and how you did it and all the rest of it. You'll feel better then, maybe. Come on, spill it all."

Snake boggled over the start; but with a little more brisk urging by Ward, whose manner was as matter-of-fact as if the crime were nothing more serious than fishing out of season, he began a hang-dog recital. Ward, reaching into an inner pocket, quietly stepped behind Douglas. The latter felt a note-book being pressed against his back, followed by the quiver of a rapidly moving pencil. Unseen by Snake, whose eyes rested on the floor, the whole story was being recorded.

Shorn of twists and turns and blundering attempts to show justification for the attack on the Bumps, the confession corroborated the tale told by Steve that afternoon in Uncle Eb's kitchen. Snake asserted that the Bump crowd had cheated him in a berry-picking deal, stolen some of his "pick" outright, assaulted him when he demanded his due; all of which perhaps was true. He denied having plied Steve with liquor in order to make him a scapegoat, but admitted having deserted him after the commission of the crime. And, so far as the crime itself was concerned, he cleared Steve absolutely.

When his stumbling narrative was concluded, Ward

gave him no rest. Whether or not confession be good for the soul, man-hunters know that it is good for the ends of justice to keep a criminal talking when once he has started. Wherefore he briskly asserted: "That's good, Sanders, that's fine. Now tell us what happened to Nat Oaks. You were with him. Come on, open up."

"I—I—I dunno. I warn't into this house with him. Honest to Gawd!"

"Not in the house? Outside, though. Sure. Out in the yard, now? You saw him come out, anyway. What did he do?"

Snake wriggled; glanced around; licked his lips again; looked cornerwise into Ward's eyes.

"Wal—uh—I tell ye. Nat, he was crazy drunk. He come down here to—to git Hampton. He was p'ison mad 'bout them dawgs that Hampton kilt. I come with him—I was tryin' to git him to go home—I didn't want no ——"

"Never mind that stuff. What did he do?"

"He—uh—he snuck in by hisself. I was out into the road. He was into the house—all to oncet he give a yell an' he come a-runnin'. He never said nawthin'—he was a-fussin', like, into his throat, a-groanin' an' a-grumblin'—an awful kind of a noise! He come a-tearin' right by me an' went *kersmash* into the bresh, an' I hearn him a-thrashin' round into the dark, an' then I didn't hear him no more. An' I was scairt—I run right up the road an' put for home. That's Gawd's truth, fellers. I dunno what got him—'less'n 'twas Jake's ha'nt."

His head was up now, and he looked into the faces of the others as if telling the truth—or part of the truth. Ward regarded him silently, perhaps deciding to let the Oaks matter rest. Then Douglas shot a sudden question.

"What did you have against Jake?"

Snake's jaw dropped. He stared as if a ghost had risen from the floor. Bill and Ward looked mystified, but watched him keenly. From Steve sounded a low grunt, as if he partly understood and wholly approved the question. Marion, a rapt witness of the proceedings, stood awaiting the answer though not comprehending the purport of the demand.

"I—uh—me an' Jake—we didn't have no trouble," stuttered Snake. "What ye mean? We was good friends ——"

"Ye lie!" broke in Steve. "Ye said Jake stole yer licker, an' if he done it ag'in ye'd git him! I hearn ye an' Jake a-rowin' 'bout it one time up into the rocks—before I got sent away. Ye told him if he stole 'nother jug o' yourn he'd find snakes into it!"

"Aha!" Douglas pounced on the revelation. "And he did steal another, eh? Did he? Quick, now!"

The vicious face reddened with quick anger.

"Yas, he did! He done it more'n oncet—the fat hawg-bellied fool!—he'd steal every time he got a chance. He was too lousy lazy to make his own ——"

"And so you chopped off a rattler's rattle and put the snake in here! Didn't you? Hurry up!"

"Yas, I did, ye smart Aleck! What of it? Puttin'

a snake into a house ain't killin' nobody. I only done it to scare him."

"So? A fine way to scare a man—cutting off those rattles! You'll be saying next that you only meant to scare me awhile ago when you shot at me on the floor. You only intended to scare me when you let that copperhead out of the box on Dickie Barre, maybe—without letting me know it was there. Of course! You know mighty well what killed Jake, and Nat, too, and you've been expecting the same thing to get me here—that rattler. Now you all listen a minute while I tell you what Dalton's Death was."

And for the first time Douglas revealed the truth about the ha'nt.

"That's the only reason why you let me live here in peace," he accused. "You thought your snake would finish me as it finished Jake. When it didn't you put Nat up to stabbing me, while you stayed outside ——"

"Ye can't prove nothin'!" flared Snake, eyeing him in hot hatred. "I wisht a dozen snakes had bit ye, ye meddlin' sneaker! But ye can't prove what ye said—ther' ain't a witness nowheres! An' how would I know the snake had gone to livin' into the bed? How'd I know it didn't go outen the house? I didn't make it bite Jake—I didn't know 'twas here when Nat come—ye can't prove I put Nat up to comin'—an' that shootin' jest now was a accident—my thumb slipped ——"

"Lies, lies, lies!" Douglas growled. "Accident? The same kind of accident that threw Lou over the edge of the Wall! But your accidents are finished now, thanks to the accident that she hit that tree and

wasn't killed. All right, Ward. I'll shut up. Take him away."

Ward was scowling, as if Douglas had upset his program. But he nodded shortly and reached under his coat. His hand came away with a pair of handcuffs.

"No need of any more grillin', I guess," he said. "We've got all the proof we need about the Brackett matter, and this guy can tell his side to the judge. Stick out your hands, Sanders!"

Snake seemed paralyzed. His eyes were bulging, and he stared at Douglas as if disbelieving his ears. His mouth worked twice before words came.

"She warn't kilt?" he blurted. "She ain't dead?"

"Not yet, but soon," Ward snapped. "She's dyin', but we've got her whole story wrote down and witnessed. Didn't know that, did you? Thought the fellows around here were shootin' at you just on suspicion, hey? Nothin' to it, Sanders—you're up against it cold. You give us the double-cross once awhile ago, but we're collectin' on that little deal now. Shove out those hands before I bust you one!"

Utter desperation blanched Snake's face. His hands began to lift as if weights were dragging them down. His hunted eyes flickered all about. Suddenly he stiffened. His left hand flashed up, pointing.

"It's a lie!" he screeched. "Ther' she is—ther' by the winder! Lou! Lou! Come in an' tell 'em it's a lie!"

So real was his sudden appeal that involuntarily

every man wheeled to see that imaginary figure beyond. Instantly Snake struck.

His right fist shot against Ward's neck, knocking him headlong. His left smashed into the face of Bill, who was turning back to him. Bill, too, toppled and fell—but reached for his revolver even as he dropped. Hampton, jumping at his enemy, collided with the empty wall. Snake was not there.

He was flashing across the room. At the window he stopped an instant. His hand licked out, seized Hampton's gun leaning against the wall. He spun about, half leveled it at Hampton, jerked both triggers —got no answering explosion. The safety was on, locking the weapon against discharge. With an oath he whirled to throw himself through the window.

A sharp report cracked from the floor where Bill lay. It was drowned by a stunning crash beyond the prone officer. The house heaved with the terrific concussion. Blue smoke blurred the whole room.

Deafened, Douglas teetered on his heels, peering through the haze at a mangled huddle under the window.

Faintly to his numbed ears came a piercing yell of sated vengeance.

"I got him!" screamed Steve. "Both barrils! *Yeeeeow!*"

Then, grinning like a mad wolf, the pain-racked boy slowly crumpled to the floor and lay still.

CHAPTER XXIX

OUT OF THE PAST

THREE men straightened up and turned slowly away from a shot-riddled thing which also had been a man. Their gaze centered on another motionless form a few feet away, its thin hands still clutched around a battered old muzzle-loader. Beside that silent figure knelt an anxious-eyed girl, down whose shoulders hung disordered red hair.

"Well," said Ward in business-like tones, "this is what I call a good clean-up. The quicker a snake gits killed the better. This one's as dead as they make 'em, and the State won't have to spend a nickel on givin' him a trial and bumpin' him off. Nor it won't have to give this kid any more board and lodgin' down the river. All we've got to do now is have you folks witness that confession, and then we'll drift out and report. Sanders was shot resistin' arrest, and Bill here done the shootin'. Ain't that right, Bill?"

He winked at his burly partner. Bill grinned heavily and returned the wink.

"Yeah. That's right. Killed by Officer William Moiphy in p'formance o' dooty. I dunno if I hit him, but I shot and he croaked, and that's good enough for the records. But what about the kid? Hadn't we oughter take him out till they fix up the red tape down below?"

"Nope," decisively. "We can fix that. Kid can't travel anyway. Might kill him. We'll leave him lay here and git better if he can. More'n that, I'm goin' to send that Brackett woman's doctor up here to tend to him. Charge the bill up to expenses. The State owes him that much, anyway. Now, sister, let's have a look at him."

As Ward stooped over the unconscious youth the girl drew back in instinctive distrust, one hand slipping toward the gun she had captured from Snake. The man gave her a look half-amused, half-warning. Douglas spoke soothingly.

"It's all right, Marion. Maybe you didn't notice what was said just now. Steve's cleared, and Ward here is going to send in a doctor. These fellows are leaving—and so am I. Steve will be well soon, and then you two can get married, and—and—everything's all right."

Despite himself, his last words sounded hollow. He turned his gaze to the wan face of the wolf-boy, sombrely contemplating the sunken cheeks, the deep-rimmed eyes, all the painfully apparent ravages of privation and sickness. He did not observe the sudden amazement in the three other faces, which turned quickly to his; nor the ensuing tiny tremble of the girl's lips.

"Huh? These two git—— Gee, I thought—— Huh!" muttered Bill, blankly looking from boy to girl and then back at Hampton. Ward, too, stared; then, tongue in cheek, looked down again at Steve.

"Git married? Me and Steve?" breathed Marion. "And you—you're goin' ——"

A moan from the floor, a shudder of the ragged body and a trembling of the hands around the gun, cut her short and drew the attention of all. The pale lips twitched; the eyes opened, steadied on Ward's face. The jaw clicked shut. Steve struggled to rise.

"All right, lad," Ward said kindly. "We don't want you. Take it easy. You're in the clear, and Sanders is croaked, and we're goin' out and leave you. Now you'd better git to bed. Hampton, want to put your blankets around him? And shut that back window of yours. We left it open ——"

"That's how you got in?"

"Sure. We spotted that easy-slidin' window days ago—made a little call here and looked things over again, just for luck. I don't aim to overlook anything when I'm on a job. So to-night when we heard that cannon go off we took it on the run, looked in here and saw you had got Sanders cornered, and eased ourselves in by that window to git an earful of what you were raggin' about. It helps a lot sometimes to hear things without lettin' folks know —— Huh? What's that, kid?"

Steve was trying to break in. Now he gasped:

"Leave me lay. Go look out for mom. Snake, he mauled her. He went there—'fore he come here. I found her all ——"

Marion sprang up with a cry.

"Mom? Snake hurt her?"

"Yuh—he mauled her awful. She told me—take the gun and—see if ye was here. I put her on the bed—and I come a-runnin'. She's hurt bad. Git to her."

Douglas and Bill tensed. Ward straightened with a snap.

"More dirty work!" growled Ward, with a hard look at the dead man beyond. "We'd all better git up there. Say, Miss Oaks! How about bringin' this Steve to your house? This ain't a good place for him."

"Oh, bring him, bring him! Poor mom! I'm a-goin'!"

She sped into the night. Ward moved swiftly after her.

"Bill, you and Hampton fetch him along," he commanded. And he, too, was lost in the darkness.

Hastily Douglas gathered his blankets and threw them around Steve, who doggedly strove to stand on his own legs but could not. Deprived now of the vengeful force which had sustained him so long, he was utterly without strength. But his wasted frame was no burden at all to the muscles of the two strong men aiding him. And a moment later, bundled in warm woven wool, he was being borne rapidly along the road, his tortured chest enwrapped in the bulging arms of the man who had remorselessly hunted him, his legs upheld by the tall "furriner" who had stood by him ever since his return from prison walls. Before the three, the white beam of the gas lamp lit up the road. Behind, stiffening in the blackness of the

eerie house where at last he had entrapped himself, lay the creature whose venom would never more menace the dwellers in the Traps.

At the door of the Oaks house Ward met them. His face was grave.

"Put him on this here cot," he quietly directed. "I've got the fire goin' and some water on." Lowering his voice and nodding toward an inner room where an oil lamp shone feebly, he added: "She's in there. Can't do anything for her. She's all busted up inside. Hemorrhages. She won't last till daybreak."

"Talkin' any?" hoarsely whispered Bill.

"Nope. Just holdin' the girl's hand. She might say somethin' later on. We'll stick around."

They lowered Steve to a rickety sofa, opened the blanket-roll encasing him, and bared his ridge-ribbed chest. Ward tiptoed about and found mustard and cloths. Bill, clumsily anxious to do something but ignorant of how to go about it, fidgeted a moment and then appointed himself guardian of the fire. Steve, lips pressed together, lay still, moving only his eyes, which went back and forth between Douglas and the doorway of the inner room. The blond man nodded and stole to the portal.

Within, he saw two faces: one thin, dark, pillowed in a worn old bed—a face gray-white beneath its swarthiness; the other fair, rounded, but white and set, leaning close. Across the mouth of the sufferer lay a towel blotched with red stains, and from the headboard another hung ready. The black-browed eyes were closed, and across the forehead above them

softly stroked gentle tapering fingers. On the shabby counterpane a work-worn old hand and a shapely young one were joined. Somewhere a cheap clock ticked as if hurrying along the last hours of the injured woman's life. That, and difficult breathing, were the only sounds.

Marion's head turned, and for a moment her grief-stricken eyes dwelt on the blue ones at the doorway. Then they returned to the face on the pillow. Douglas withdrew. In that straight look he had found confirmation of what his own gaze and Ward's laconic words had told him.

He shook his head soberly at Steve and at the other two, watching him. The boy's mouth set harder; but he said nothing. Ward went on making a hot poultice. Bill shifted his feet and awkwardly fed another stick into the stove.

"I don't quite git it," Ward mused in an undertone, as the three gathered around Steve. "What would Sanders beat her up for?"

"For the same reason that he would kill Lou Brackett and shoot at me," Douglas explained. "It all fits in together. The reason is—Marion."

"Wanted her, you mean?"

"Exactly. He couldn't have her and Lou too, so he got rid of Lou. He threw her off the Wall because that would look like an accident. A snake-bite wouldn't do, because folks would be too suspicious, especially since snakes are denning up now. Any other form of murder, too, would look bad. A fall off the Wall would be the most natural thing.

"Mrs. Oaks, here, hated Sanders, and he knew it. From what Steve tells us—that she told him to leave her and see if Marion was at my house—Sanders must have come here determined to drag the girl away to a hole in the rocks where he's been hiding lately. She probably cussed him out—maybe threatened him with the gun—and he thought Marion was here. So he jumped on her, pounded her like the murderous brute he was, searched the house, and then came to my place; saw us in there, and jumped in to finish me and grab her before she could get to my gun."

"Sounds reasonable," Ward nodded, drawing Steve's shirt together over the deftly arranged plaster. "He sure was a hard guy. Well, there's no more to do now but wait. You git to sleep, lad, if you can. I'm goin' out for a little smoke."

He passed to the bedroom doorway, looked in, then quietly opened and closed the outer door. A minute later, outside a window, showed the flare of a match and the glow of a pipe.

Time dragged past. Steve lay silent. Bill and Douglas sat wordless. Ward returned, found some cold biscuit and butter, made a big pot of coffee, passed them around. From time to time one or another of them stepped to the door and looked in on the girl keeping her grim vigil; then tiptoed back and resumed his seat.

Hour after hour crawled along, measured only by the unfeeling tick of that cheap clock, which had no hour-bell. Steve slept. Bill dozed, sprawling in his chair. Ward and Hampton nursed empty pipes.

From the room beyond came occasional choking noises, but no voice.

Then, low but penetrating, sounded a call for aid.

"Douglas! Come help me!"

In six strides Douglas was beside Marion, who was supporting the older woman's bony shoulders in her arms. The dark eyes were open now, and the red-dyed mouth was gasping for breath.

"She wants to be lifted," added the girl. "I can do it, but I might shake her. Jest raise her easy."

With a smooth lift he set Eliza against the pillows which Marion erected at her back. One glance into the ashy face and the glassy eyes told him that the end was close at hand.

For a minute or two the dying woman looked fixedly at him. She seemed gathering her strength. Her gaze went to Marion. Then it centered again on Hampton's strong, clean face.

"I'm a-goin'," she breathed. "Snake done it. Did ye—git him?"

"Steve got him," he answered. "Got him with Nat's gun. Both barrels. He owned up first, though, that Steve didn't burn out the Bumps. Steve goes free. Everything's all right. Don't talk."

A wild light filled the fixed eyes. A haggard smile crooked the thin lips.

"Steve done it! Nat's gun! That's good! Awful good!"

A sudden cough and a fresh red flow stopped her. Then, instead of drooping back, she seemed to

straighten and strengthen. Her breath came short, but more easily.

"I got to talk. Don't hender me. I ain't got much time. I got to tell ye—'fore I go. Marry—ain't ourn."

Douglas started.

"Not yours? Not your daughter?"

"No. I never had no—young 'uns of my own. We got Marryin—three year old. Her pop was—a painter feller. From Noo York. Name was Dyke.

"He come into here—fourteen year ago—paint pictures. Wife had got drownded—sailboat sunk into ocean—nigh Noo York, he—told us. He was awful grievious 'bout it. Come up here to paint an'—git over it. Brought his little gal—Marryin—all he had left—little rosy gal—purty as a angel.

"We was more 'spectable then. Nat he worked—didn't drink much—hunted an' trapped—made a good livin'. Dyke wanted board with us. We let him. He went paintin'—up 'long the crick—up onto Minnewasky—diff'rent places. Little Marryin stayed here mostly—'count o' snakes—daddy was scairt she'd git—bit if she went 'long o' him.

"Dyke was good feller but—quick-tempered—git fightin' mad like a shot. Him an' Nat—they had two-three spats. One time they went huntin'. Nat come home 'lone. Said Dyke fell offen Dickabar. Kilt.

"We got him outen—the rocks. Buried him out back. Nat got drinkin'—talkin' into his sleep—let out that him an' Dyke fit 'bout suthin'. Nat busted his neck. When he see what he—done, he throwed him—offen Dickabar to look like—he fell by—hisself.

" 'Course I never told. Nat he was my man. Snake Sanders, he—knowed or 'spicioned—I dunno how—but he kep' Nat scairt. Made Nat do—dirty work. But he never—told on him. Nor I wouldn't—tell ye now but—Nat he's gone—can't nobody hurt him now. I'm a-goin' too—Marry she'll be 'lone—'ceptin' for Steve an'—you. One o' ye's got to—look out for her."

She gasped, struggled up straighter, fought off the tightening clasp of Death. Her dimming eyes traveled about the blur of hovering faces. Except Steve, asleep outside, all in the house now were clustered around the bed.

" Ye—Hampton—I been mad at ye—but—ye come from outside—like Marry's pop. Marry she—b'longs outside too. Her folks was quality—she warn't borned into—Traps. She'd oughter go out.

" Steve an' her, they—growed up like brother an'—sister. They knowed they warn't—but they been the same. Steve got livin' with us—I dunno jest when—he was little feller—he jest come an' stayed. They growed—like I said. He's good boy but—he ain't fitten to—take care o' Marry. Too wild—too young—he ain't got a stiddy head—ye know what I—mean. I'd go easier to know she was—took care of by—strong man that knowed things."

She strove to make out the expression on the face of the blond blur which was Hampton. She could not. But to her failing ears came a deep-toned, solemn promise.

" I will take care of her. As if she were my own sister."

Another faint smile fluttered and faded. The black head sank back wearily. Once more the stiffening lips moved.

"Marry gal—I might of—done better—by ye. I cussed ye—knocked ye round—but I kep' ye—safe. Snake nor no other—varmint never—got ye. I done the—best I—knowed how. I—I'm—a-goin' ——"

A quiver ran from breast to lips. The arms went limp. The body relaxed.

Nigger Nat's woman—primitive product of harsh hills, hard-bitten, hard-spoken, unmannered and unlovely, yet loyal to the last to her man and the waifs whom she had taken to her craggy heart—had laid down the burden of life and passed on.

CHAPTER XXX

THE CALL OF THE SOUTH

BRILLIANT morning sunlight flooded the dingy kitchen-dining-living-room of the Oaks house. Late though the season was, the southward-rising sun now lit up the interior more clearly than it ever had in midsummer; for its slanting rays, instead of sinking into green ground and foliage, now ricocheted upward from a thin earth-blanket of snow.

That snow was two days old, and the latest of three light falls which had come since the night when Snake Sanders and his last victim passed out. The other two had speedily melted, and even this one had shrunk noticeably in an ensuing thaw. But to-day the air was keen and the white coverlet hard.

Snow and cold, however, meant little to the eight gathered in that room. In the cheery warmth radiating from the mud-colored old stove four of them crouched or lay in the sleepy contentment of full stomachs, while the other four sat pensively on chairs or sofa. The floor-hugging contingent comprised the Oaks felines—Spit and Spat and Fit and Fat. The folks above them were Marion, Steve, Douglas, and Uncle Eb.

Beside the outer door stood two guns—one, an old,

rust-pitted muzzle-loader; the other a clean, graceful hammerless—and a blanket pack, to which a smaller bundle had been lightly corded. To a contemplative eye those insensate things would have told a story of double trust: that, as the guns stood side by side, so would their owners stand shoulder to shoulder; and that the man who presently would carry that pack would bear also the light burden of a woman who had faith in him—for that small package was unmistakably a thin dress, within which probably were wrapped a few other articles of clothing.

"Wal," barked Uncle Eb, shattering a thoughtful silence, "ye might say this was the endin' an' the beginnin'. Nat an' 'Lizy an' Snake an' Lou are all into their graves, an' them detective fellers are so long gone I 'most forgot they ever was into here, an' Steve's back onto his legs, an' Marry an' Hammerless are a-goin' out. An' that's the endin'. But then ag'in, Steve's a-comin' to live 'long o' me, an' if old Ninety-Nine's Mine ain't lost ag'in by next spring we'll see what we can make outen it; an' Marry's a-startin' into that thar art-school ye told about, Hamp; an' ye say ye're a-goin' to quit driftin' round an' git into a reg'lar business down to the city—sellin' bonds, did ye say? An' so that's the beginnin'. Now all I'm bothered 'bout is how I'm a-goin' to keep these cats to my house. They'll run right back here, I bet ye."

"When they see ther' ain't nothin' to eat here they'll come a-scootin' up the hill ag'in, don't worry," predicted Steve, a saturnine smile crooking his pale mouth. "Ther' won't be nobody livin' into here, 'less'n Marry

gits homesick an' wants to come back. Anybody else that tries movin' in will move out ag'in quick's I can git to him. Marry, don't ye kind o' hate to go?"

"I—dunno," she slowly answered. "It's the onliest home I ever knowed, but—but it ain't the same now. No! I—I *couldn't* live here! Now that I know who my real daddy was, and—and I've got a chance to draw real pictures and—and *be* somebody 'sides 'Nigger Nat's girl' and 'that red-headed catamount' and all——"

She paused, her eyes shining as the misty portal of Dreams swung back and gave her a vision of what lay beyond. The three men nodded; Douglas understandingly, Uncle Eb decisively, Steve sombrely.

"That's right," Douglas agreed. "You've been underground long enough, and now you must blossom out into the sun. It's your daddy's blood that has driven you to draw and dream, and he'd tell you now to go out and develop your talent. That's his heritage to you—that urge to draw—and you owe it to him to make something of it. It means work, but it's worth while."

"Oh, I can work—won't I work, though! And—and some day I'm comin' back up here and draw that hole in the crick that's bothered me so long—and paint it, too—and make it right!"

Her slender fingers closed and her cheeks flushed in joyous enthusiasm. Steve eyed her soberly, then nodded again.

"Yas, tha's right, I reckon," he sighed. "It's

a-goin' to be awful lonesome 'thout ye, Marry gal, but mebbe ye won't forgit us. I—I ——" He stopped abruptly and gulped.

"Why—why, Stevie!" She sprang up and stroked his hair. "I won't never forgit you, never! You've always been good to me—stood up for me like a real brother many's the time—it 'most broke my heart when they sent you away. And when the noo-mony got you jest lately I ——"

"Don't say no more," he broke in huskily. "Ye've stood up for me too, an' ye pulled me through that noo-mony, an' I couldn't ask no more. But I got to tell ye, Marry—I ain't 'shamed to say it right out front of everybody—I got thinkin' mebbe sometime we might —might git married, all reg'lar, with a ring an' everythin'. I hadn't no right to, but I couldn't help it. But then I see it warn't no use. I done a lot o' thinkin', up thar into my hole into the ground, an' I could see plain ye was 'way over my head."

His teeth set, and the hard lines around his mouth deepened. But he drove himself on.

"An' I see the kind of a feller ye'd oughter have was like Hamp, here. An' that's mostly why I resked it to put that note under yer door, Hamp, the night Nat come ——"

"What! Was it you who did that?" exclaimed Douglas.

"Me. Snake an' Nat was right close by my hole, never knowin' I was into it, an' Snake was edgin' Nat on to go down an' do for ye. When they was gone I wrote that warnin' an' snuck down 'long Dickabar an'

left it for ye. I owed ye a good turn anyways, but I done it for Marry more'n for you."

A moment Douglas sat, realizing what the fugitive had risked in thus issuing from his covert and threading a mile of detective-haunted forest. Then he reached out and grasped the bony hand of the convalescent.

"You're a man!" he declared.

"I aim to be," said Steve, with another gulp.

A short, awkward silence followed. Marion, sober-faced, tenderly stroked the shaggy black hair until Steve dodged, as if the caress were becoming torment. Uncle Eb glared fixedly at one of the cats. Douglas looked at all three; then arose as if reaching a determination.

"This isn't the way I'd thought of it, but it's as good as any," he said quietly. "I had intended first, Marion, to take you to an elderly friend of mine in town—Mrs. Wright, who takes a keen interest in young artists and who undoubtedly would remember your father. She's a dear old soul, and I know she'd be only too glad to make everything easy for you; she's a patroness of that school I spoke of, and besides that she could coach you on all those little things a lady of her type knows so well—speech and manners and clothes and the other points you'll have to learn in order to 'be somebody,' as you say. And I'd rustle a job down in the financial district and keep my promise to your mother—to look out for you as if you were my sister. And when you'd had time to see how you liked the change, and to find out what the city

boys looked like, and so on—then I'd ask you a question.

"I wanted to give you a fair chance—not to jump this question at you before you fairly got your eyes open to this new world of yours. But circumstances alter cases. I'll take you to Mrs. Wright just the same, but I'm going to ask the question now instead of later. Like Steve, I'm not afraid to say it right out in front of everybody. What's more, Steve has the right to know what's what. And ——"

He paused. The wide gray eyes dwelt unwaveringly on his. So did the old steel-blue eyes and the young brown ones.

"The first time we met," he went on, with a little smile, "you said you were 'Marry for short.' I'm asking you if you'll make it 'marry for good.' If so, we'll hunt up a parson when we tramp into New Paltz, and go down the river as Mr. and Mrs. Hampton."

Steadfastly she regarded him a moment longer. Steve and Uncle Eb sat breathless.

"Let me ask you somethin'," she returned. "If Steve had got sent back down-river you'd never have asked me this, would you?"

"Why—if I still thought you and he were sweethearts—probably not. It wouldn't be fair to either of you."

"Was that what you meant when you spoke 'bout Steve—that day up the crick?"

"Certainly. What did you think?"

"I thought all 'long you—didn't want to git too

thick with a girl that was a—a half sister to a feller that had been into the pen! That you couldn't have enough respect for a girl like that to—to—you know. And it—kind of hurt."

"Good Lord! I never even knew you two were brought up under the same roof, until the night your mother—that is, 'Liza Oaks—died. If I had, maybe I'd have asked sooner!"

The cool gray eyes grew warm. The red lips curved in a dimpling smile. But his question remained unanswered. Her gaze went to the waiting packs and guns. Outside, a horse stamped impatiently.

"Ain't it about time to be goin'?" she asked demurely. "That hoss of Uncle Eb's is gittin' restless. Uncle Eb, you'd better git the cats into the bags."

"But ye ain't told Hamp ——" Steve protested.

"I know it, foolish! And I ain't goin' to tell him till I git ready. It might be five minutes, or mebbe five years, he'll have to wait; and till he knows you won't know either. And that's all of that!"

Uncle Eb chuckled. Douglas spread his hands in resignation. Steve glowered, then half grinned.

"Might a-knowed it," he muttered. "Sassy as a red squir'l, ain't ye? Ye won't never git no better."

And with that the question was dropped. Ensued a scramble, ending in the confinement in burlap sacks of four spitting, spatting felines; a donning of hats and coats, a closing up of stove-draughts, and a wobbly progress by Steve to Uncle Eb's waiting wagon. There he was enwrapped in a huge quilt. Uncle Eb clambered in and encased his legs in the horse-blanket.

The horse started at once. And up the road slowly traveled the old man and his new foster-son, with dead Nigger Nat's muzzle-loader leaning stark and grim between them.

Behind them, swinging easily along the frozen road, walked the man and the maid, their faces reddening under the sharp kiss of the wintry air. Once, and once only, they paused to glance back at the abandoned house. Then they trudged on, silent.

At length the wagon stopped. The Clove road had ended, and the horse now stood in the true Traps road, heading westward. Up that way waited Uncle Eb's home. Eastward opened the Gap, and beyond lay the great Outside. This was the parting of the ways.

And here Steve spoke out, man to man.

"Hamp, I'm a-trustin' ye. But a feller never knows. If ever Marry should come a-crawlin' back into here, sorry an' shamed, then look out! I'll be a-comin' after ye wuss'n I ever went after Snake, an' I'll come a-shootin'. Tha's all. Good luck to the both o' ye."

"You won't be coming after me, lad," Douglas answered steadily. "We'll both be coming back to see you in the spring, whether Marion's name then is Dyke or Hampton. And I'm leaving with you, as a pledge and a present—this."

Into the space between the two riders he swung his shotgun. Then he gripped Steve's hand and stepped back. The youth stared at his new gun as if the heavens had opened before him. Even when Marion climbed up and kissed him farewell he seemed dazed

by the wonder of actually possessing such a weapon. Uncle Eb grinned dryly and gave Douglas an approving nod.

The old man's farewell was characteristically short. He gave each a straight look, a lift of the walrus mustache, a paralyzing handshake. Then ——

"Luck to ye! G'yapalong!"

The wagon rolled away.

With a sigh and a smile, Douglas and Marion turned their faces eastward. Steadily they swung along the hummocky track, climbing upward, ever upward, by easy grade or steep slant, toward the Gap a mile away. From time to time they glanced at each other, but they spoke no word. The only sounds were the flapping of frozen leaves still adhering to cold boughs, the crunch of snow under heel, the occasional bay of a far-off hound.

So they came to the Jaws of the Traps, where the road sneaked between towering ledges and then pitched down in swift-dropping zigzags to the low hills of the Beyond. Out before them stretched a snowy panorama through which, black and slow, meandered the serpentine Wallkill. Away to the east, hidden behind intervening hills, flowed the wide Hudson. Far to the south, that river rolled past the vast city of New York, to be swallowed by the waiting ocean. But much nearer—only six miles off—stood out clearly a little town where lived clergymen, and where a wedding ring could be bought; the first town on their outward way: New Paltz.

There between the crags they halted, poising on the

brink between the Traps and the World, the hard old life and the nebulous new. Still they said nothing. His gaze dwelt on her, and hers on that town. Something counseled him to keep silence.

Then into the stillness came a sound from the north: a sound new to the man: a yapping confusion of noise suggesting the breathless chorus of a pack of hard-running dogs. It grew in volume until it became like the strident creak and groan of many rickety, unoiled wagons, full of discordant undertones and overnotes. Yet it was not on the ground, but in the air, somewhere beyond the northern cliff which blocked the view.

"Geese!" cried Marion. "I wondered why we hadn't heard some. They're late. But they're goin' fast now. The lakes up north are froze, and winter's comin' close. There they are!"

High up, a long wedge slid across the sky. Its lines wavered, bent, but never broke. Along them winked an unceasing quiver of strong-beating wings; from them fell the clamorous medley of voices old and young, deep and shrill. Straight as their wild instinct could guide them, straight as the man and the maiden below would speed down the river when they should reach the railroad, the birds were flying south.

"Goin' south—and so are we," the girl softly echoed his own thought. And they turned their eyes again to the roofs six miles away.

"Marion—dear—what is it to be?" he asked. "Let's decide."

A deeper color flowed into her cheeks, a roguish twinkle into her eyes. Half shyly, she looked up at him.

"Ain't you scairt to marry a red-headed catamount?" she demanded. "They're awful critters to git along with."

"I never married one yet, but I'm not scared," he smiled. "I've held my own with every one I've met so far."

Under the curving brows flamed a daring, tantalizing light.

"Seems to me you—you ain't holdin' your own right now," she teased.

He blinked. Then light shot over his face. One stride, and his arms were around her.

"Who says I'm not?" he challenged.

"That's—that's better!"

Her arms clasped tight around his neck. Her lips rose, tremulous, questing, waiting. His head dropped, and his embrace tightened. And then between the crusted crags there stood no longer a girl of the hills and a man from outside. Lip to lip, heart to heart, soul to soul—the twain had become one.

After a time his head lifted. Passive, clinging, trembling, she lay back in his arms.

"Are you—sure we can find a—a parson down to Paltz?" she whispered.

He laughed, and drew her up to him again. Yielding lips stopped his breath, and the laugh died. But faintly from the south sounded an echo of his tender mirth—a bubbling, gabbling sound which in turn died

out and was gone: the honking hilarity of the sharp-eyed wild geese.

THE END

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